



Storyteller of Love and Heroes on the American Frontier

DOROTHY WILEY

WILDERNESS DAWNING

BUCKSKIN ANGEL

THE
TEXAS WYLLIE BROTHERS

BUCKSKIN ANGEL

WILDERNESS DAWNING SERIES, Book 3

Dorothy Wiley

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BUCKSKIN ANGEL

Dorothy Wiley

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BUCKSKIN ANGEL is a fictional novel inspired by history, rather than a precise account of history. Except for historically prominent personages, the characters are fictional and names, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Each book in the series can be read independently.

For the sake of understanding, the author used language for her characters for the modern reader rather than strictly reflecting the far more formal speech and writing patterns of the 18th-century.

*To healthcare workers, first responders, and law enforcement—
the warriors who have cared for us during the Pandemic.*

Thank you and God bless you!

Baldy would be proud.

Other Titles by Dorothy Wiley

WILDERNESS TRAIL OF LOVE

NEW FRONTIER OF LOVE

WHISPERING HILLS OF LOVE

FRONTIER HIGHLANDER VOW OF LOVE

frontier gift of love

The Beauty of love

LOVE'S NEW BEGINNING

love's sunrise

love's glory

love's whisper

RED RIVER RIFLES

LAND OF STARS

Praise for Dorothy Wiley's Books

"My favorite author. Her writing is pure gold."

– P. McGinnity

"Beautifully researched and meticulously crafted."

– A. Hughes

"Ms. Wiley is a genius! Best wilderness series, ever!!!"

– 4hjunkie

"I read every one and started over!"

– J. Goss

"They are the best books. Read them all and cannot wait for the new one!"

– B.W. Davis

"My favorite author! Anxiously awaiting the next one!"

– G.M.P. Lewis

"Wiley is a fabulous author in my opinion. I highly recommend her. Truly a marvelous writer. I am hooked on these!!"

– S. Wolfe

"I am a huge fan of Wiley's books! Dorothy is a brilliant historical romance writer! 5 stars all the way!!"

– L. Ratterman

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– K. Smith

“I love your books and read them every day. I want more!!!! You are a favorite author.”

– J.Bainter

“Historical romance writing that is unmatched.”

– L.A. Smith

“A wonderfully written historical novel set during the settling of the west by a very favorite author.”

– J. Weiss

Hail, Columbia

*Hail Columbia, happy land!
Hail, ye heroes, heav'n-born band,
Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,
Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,
And when the storm of war was gone
Enjoy'd the peace your valor won.
Let independence be our boast,
Ever mindful what it cost;
Ever grateful for the prize,
Let its altar reach the skies.*

Chorus

*Firm, united let us be,
Rallying round our liberty,
As a band of brothers joined,
Peace and safety we shall find.*

Music for "Hail Columbia" composed by Philip Phile
and lyrics by Joseph Hopkinson in 1798.

CHARACTERS IN 1824

WYLLIES:

Captain Sam – age 66, owner of Cumberland Falls Horse Farm (hero of NEW FRONTIER OF LOVE and FRONTIER GIFT OF LOVE), married to **Catherine**, age 66

Sam and Catherine's sons:

Little John – age 34, adopted by Sam and Catherine, (hero of LOVE'S GLORY), husband of **Allison**, age 33, and father of **Margaret**, age 7

Rory – age 24

William –age 60, a lawyer (hero of WHISPERING HILLS OF LOVE), husband of Kelly, age 45, and father of Nicole, age 26

Stephen – age 57, youngest Wyllie brother, widower, and father of six, (hero of WILDERNESS TRAIL OF LOVE)

Stephen and Jane's sons, co-owners of Wyllie Cattle and Horse Company:

Samuel –age 27 (hero of RED RIVER RIFLES), husband of **Louisa**, age 24, and father of Little Stephen, infant son

Thomas – age 25, husband of **Abigail**, age 21

Steve (Stephen, Jr.) – age 22 (hero of LAND OF STARS), husband of **Rebecca**, age 19

Other Wyllies mentioned but not in this book:

Edward – age 62, Sam's middle brother, a lawyer in Lexington (hero of THE BEAUTY OF LOVE), husband of Dora

Cornelius – age 23, son of Stephen Wyllie, now living in Arkansas
Martha, age 36, daughter of Stephen Wyllie, married to Gabe
McGrath, age 39
Polly, age 32, daughter of Stephen Wyllie, married to Liam
Roberts, age 38

MACKAYS:

Daniel ‘Bear’ MacKay – adopted Wyllie brother, age 62 (hero of FRONTIER HIGHLANDER VOW OF LOVE), husband of Artis, age 47

Bear’s son with Margaret Armitage:

Daniel Armitage MacKay – age 48, (hero of LOVE’S NEW BEGINNING) husband of Ann, age 43

Bear’s children with Artis:

Alexander – age 20

Rebecca – age 18

Julianne – age 16

Two other sons and two other daughters, not yet mentioned in books.

OTHERS:

Jessica Harrison – age 19, daughter of Bill Harrison

William Harrison – widower, father of Jessica, owner of Harrison’s General Store

Jason ‘Baldy’ Grant – age 54, ordained minister and physician, (major character in LOVE’S GLORY)

Melly Grant – age 46, wife of Baldy, a nurse

Adam Pate – age 16, adopted son of Baldy and Melly, and Louisa’s brother

Donny Farley – banker’s son

Mr. Farley – Donny’s father and owner of the bank

Charles S. Tyler – age 51, owner of Tyler Sugar Farm, Rebecca’s father

Amelia Tyler – age 45, Rebecca’s mother

John Hanks – sheriff of Nacogdoches

Jack and Bud – store clerks at Harrison’s General Store

Andrew Astley – leader of the Tejano Devils

Hollis Connally – Wyllie Cattle Company foreman

Cowhands – Billy, Pete, Zack, Nate, Jack, Ray, Hunter, and Shane

José Antonio Navarro – Alcalde and Solicitor

Greta – German cook at Cumberland Falls

Captain John Holder – owner of Holder’s Tavern in Boonesborough

ANIMAL CHARACTERS:

Whiskey – Bear’s bay gelding with a black mane and tail

Lady – Alexander’s first horse

Thunder – Alexander’s dappled gray gelding

Steel – Captain Sam’s black stallion

Buck – Rory’s buckskin gelding

Stardust – Steve’s bay gelding

Samson – Samuel’s sorrel gelding

George – Stephen’s black stallion

Texana – Louisa’s mare

Caddo – Adam’s dog

1
Missing Stephen

*Cumberland Falls Horse Farm
Cumberland Falls, Kentucky
April 1824*

It was the same knife that earned him the Indian name ‘Bloody Hand’ in the Revolutionary War. The same knife he used to dig a grave for a slain comrade who fell to a Red Coat’s bayonet. Only eighteen at the time, the war didn’t just make him grow up fast. It made him hard. And four long years later, the same knife had killed a high-ranking Red Coat and earned him the rank of Captain and a medal from George Washington. In the years immediately after the war, as a wilderness guide and mapmaker, the knife continued to serve him well and never left his side.

Here in Kentucky, a thousand miles from those soul scarring memories, the knife had saved his life or a family member’s life more than once. Like him, it was a bit worse for wear. But he always kept the blade sharp, ready for any threat.

Could he do the same with himself? Could he stay sharp as the years rushed by? Not if he spent many more days in this porch rocker using his knife as he was this morning. Now, he wielded the long blade to carve the wood he held in his calloused hand into a toy.

“When will you be done, Grandpapa?” asked his impatient seven-year-old granddaughter, Margaret. He’d nicknamed her

Squirrel because she was always darting and running about. And because he thought squirrels were the most endearing of all forest animals.

Sam smiled down at her. "Soon."

"What do you think about while you carve?"

He settled back into the rocker before he answered. He decided to tell her his thoughts from earlier that morning. "I was thinking about my youngest brother. Every morning when I look around this beautiful place, I think of him."

"Why?"

"It was Stephen who urged us all to move to Kentucky, a paradise full of equal measures of land and opportunity." He would always be grateful that Stephen came up with the idea of moving here. For on that thousand-mile journey, he'd met Catherine. And with the strength of a battering ram, her love was strong enough to break down the stone walls around his hardened heart.

Margaret's brow wrinkled. "What's opportunity?"

"Opportunity allows us to take a dream and make it real. Not the kind of dreams we have when we sleep. The kind that are something your heart wants."

"Stephen is my Granduncle, isn't he?"

"You have a good memory, Squirrel."

"Grandmama says he is a good man who wanted to find more land for his sons. That's why he left Kentucky and went to Texas."

"That is exactly right. A very good man." A good man with a flaw. He always saw the horizon with more clarity than what was around him. And that made him prone to think about where he could be instead of where he was.

"Do you miss him?"

Sam nodded. "Very much so."

"Then why don't you go visit him?"

"Because I would miss you."

"But you miss him too. And I'll be here when you get back. It takes a long time to grow up."

“Did your Grandmama tell you that?”

Margaret nodded. “I miss her.”

“Me too.” It had only been two days since his beloved wife, Catherine, left for Boston. Her mother’s passing required Catherine to journey there to settle the widow’s considerable estate and she expected to be gone at least a few months. And these days, months passed by quickly.

He should have gone with her, but he hated big cities, and trouble always seemed to find him there. He had a low tolerance for foolishness and impertinence. And putting up with rude fools and a big city was harder than splitting logs in the dog days of summer. He’d done both and would give preference to the logs any day.

Never without her jeweled dagger, Catherine could defend herself well if need be. And he knew she would be well protected. She was traveling with Bear’s wife, Artis; Bear’s grown son, Daniel and wife Ann; and Bear and Artis’ daughters, Rebecca and Julianne. He trusted Daniel to keep Catherine safe. He was as big as his father and almost as fierce. And, although she was still a redheaded beauty, Artis was as skilled with arms as any man in Kentucky. Her difficult early years in the Highlands and as an indentured servant in Virginia made her an unusually strong woman.

He glanced up at the clear blue sky. The sun was nearly overhead and promised a warm afternoon. Where had the morning gone?

Margaret put her hands on her tiny hips and cocked her head at him. Her blue eyes, bright with the plucky spirit of the very young, regarded him. “I want you to go see your brother. He probably misses you too.”

Sam’s brows furrowed because he knew that was true. It seemed to him that Margaret was wise beyond her years and that made him smile at her.

He hadn’t seen Stephen for thirteen years or so but not a day

passed that he didn't think of him. The two had always been close. All his brothers were close. His other three brothers, Edward, William, and Bear lived in Kentucky though. Only Stephen had left.

His youngest brother had found the lure of free land in the Louisiana Purchase too enticing. With four sons, the man needed to find land to guarantee a prosperous future as cattlemen for them.

Yet, as Sam learned from a recent letter, the land his brother settled on along the Red River proved to be an unwise choice. Not long ago, their lands and homes suffered a catastrophic flood forcing them to relocate their families and their cattle close to Nacogdoches in the Mexican province of Texas. The good news was that all four of Sam's grown nephews found wives and were happily married now. Samuel even had an infant son now and a thriving cattle business while Steve, who recently married, was starting a horse operation. Thomas worked with the two and Cornelius was living in the Arkansas territory, after falling in love and marrying a woman there.

And their close friends Baldy, who was both a doctor and preacher, and Melly, Baldy's wife and nurse, had set up a medical practice in Nacogdoches.

When his brother left Kentucky, Stephen had promised to return every other Christmas if he could. But so far he hadn't made it back. Life has a way of getting in the way of promises. Sam understood though. Between Indians, Mexican bandits, corrupt authorities, and fickle mother nature, Stephen and his sons were focused on staying alive. Not on leisurely visits with distant relatives. From Stephen's letters, he knew his brother wouldn't dare leave his sons and their wives. Life there on the very edge of the West was too dangerous and Stephen's family needed both his rifle and his wisdom.

As he resumed carving, Sam stored away the idea planted in his head by his little Squirrel. He'd give the notion of visiting Stephen further thought later. Perhaps the next time he saw Bear, who would likely want to go with him.

But as the carving in his hand took shape, the possibility of a grand adventure with Bear didn't want to stay stored away. Instead, it swelled inside him and made his heart beat a little faster. Awakening something within him. Something that wanted to be released.

Margaret plopped down on the porch and drew her letters in the pile of white pine wood shavings at his feet. "A, B, C..." She peered up at him and she gave him a cherub's smile. "You're going, aren't you?"

There was little he could deny her. "Perhaps. It's a long way to Texas."

"How far?"

"About eight-hundred miles."

"Is that a lot?"

"It would take about a month to get there."

"Then this is your op..*opportunity* to see your brother! You have a fine horse. And Pa and his hands take good care of the horse farm."

She was right. Her father, Little John, managed the horse farm with considerable skill and had earned a sizeable profit every year. Their reputation for breeding quality mares and stallions had spread even beyond Kentucky. Last year, they had buyers from as far away as Maryland. Two years ago Little John and Allison sold their Virginia plantation that she'd inherited, and ever since, his son's focus and commitment to their horse farm never wavered.

"Shall we find some twigs to use for the antlers?" he asked.

Margaret jumped up quick as a grasshopper. "Sure!"

"See these two holes on the reindeer's head?" he asked, showing her. "We'll use beeswax to glue the twigs in there so they need be no bigger than that little hole."

With her blue smock and long, dark braids flying behind her, Margaret was already leaping off the porch toward the woods that surrounded their large two-story log and brick home.

He didn't do much leaping these days, but he could still get

around pretty well. "Wait for me!" he called as he hurried after her.

But, like time itself, Margaret didn't wait. As children are inclined to do, she bounced and skipped ahead, into the forest that smelled of a mixture of pine needles and fresh wildflowers.

As he followed, he couldn't stop thinking about the prospect of going to Texas. Catherine wasn't here to talk him out of going, which she would undoubtedly do if she were here. He loved her with all of his soul and all of his body and his wife felt the same way about him. She would want to keep him safe here in his rocking chair, carving toys for his granddaughter and many nieces and nephews. His still beautiful wife could be extremely persuasive. Just like their little squirrel.

He was rather glad Catherine wasn't here to persuade him not to go. The more he considered it, the more the idea took hold. He did miss his brother and his four nephews. They'd all been older boys when they left. Now they were men. The need to see all of them had been a little twinge in his chest that troubled him whenever he thought of Stephen. Now, that twinge was growing into a genuine ache.

He missed Baldy and Melly too. He and Catherine had both grown fond of the two while they lived here at the horse farm for a while.

If he did go, who would want to go with him? William and Edward both had thriving law practices; William in Boonesborough and Edward in Lexington. But Bear, who also lived in Boonesborough and owned a large and prosperous inn, enjoyed traveling. His wife, Artis, however, did not and so Bear often took trips on his own or with one of his five sons.

He'd bet a bottle of first-rate whiskey that Bear would be eager to go. The two of them hadn't had a good adventure in a long while and Bear was the kind of man you wanted beside you on a journey that likely held untold dangers. He had always been a formidable man, double-tough, and fear never entered into his

reasoning. And as his nickname implied, he was as big and powerful as a bear. Hairy as one too.

“Are you watching out for snakes?” he called to Margaret.

“Yes, of course, Grandpapa,” she said.

He kept a careful eye on her as she trudged across a carpet of pine needles and fallen leaves. The other eye kept watch around them for any unexpected threat. It had been his experience that danger was often a surprise, coming at you when you least expected it.

Maybe it was time for such a journey. Before he and Bear both got too old to sit in a saddle from dawn until dusk. It seemed to him that in recent years that the passage of time marched on at a double-time pace, a hurried cadence with no sympathy. And each day felt the same as the day before.

If he were honest, he felt adrift and unchallenged.

On the rare occasions that he looked in Catherine’s mirror, a stranger with a weathered and care-lined face and hair with as much gray as black gazed back at him. But inside, his spirit felt as young and vital as it always did. He could still chop wood or cut fence posts faster than his sons, ride a young horse at a fast gallop, or bring down a fleeing deer with one shot from his longrifle.

At sixty-six, most of his life was behind him now. Bear was in his sixties too. Yet, neither one of them were ready for their lives to wind down to a tortoise’s pace. Until inevitably coming to a plodding stop. The yearning for adventure still burned within them. Maybe not as hot as it once had, but it was still there making them crave new exploits and escapades. He knew this because whenever the two of them were together, they always talked about the things they should do when the time was right. When they ‘got around to it.’

“Damnation,” he whispered to himself. They would never get around to it.

The realization made him grip the deerhorn handle of the knife with enough force to turn his knuckles white.

He had to concede though his body would change with time. Soon, his body would force changes on him whether he was ready or not. But getting older was not something he would acknowledge yet, even to himself. There was still fight left in him. There were still hills to climb and rivers to cross. He felt it every time he saddled his horse.

He just had to do it all before those changes came. And he was running out of time.

“How ‘bout these?” Margaret asked, holding up a couple of twigs.

Sam glanced around him before focusing on the twigs she held. He’d been so lost in his thoughts, they’d wandered further into the woods than they usually did. He examined the twigs for a moment. “I believe you’ve found the ideal antlers.”

“Truly?”

“Yup.” He knelt in front of her and inserted the twigs into the holes in the reindeer’s head. “Perfect fit. You have a good eye, Squirrel.”

A growl, low and deep, vibrated through the trees.

Sam sprang up, thrust the reindeer into Margaret’s hands, and withdrew his knife. He preferred the blade to his pistol. A flintlock held only one shot. With his other hand, he moved Margaret behind him. “Stay behind me.”

“What is it?” she asked, a tremble in her little voice.

2
Mastering Fear

The fear-provoking, pulsing, deep-throated sound triggered every sense in Sam's head. He cocked his ear and focused his eyes toward the spot in the shade darkened forest. He couldn't see anything. But he already knew what was lurking in the heavy woods.

A bear.

During his years on the frontier, he'd learned that black bears made sounds like a huff, chomp, woof, growl, or a bark, all of which meant different things. The throaty sound this bear made meant it was agitated, annoyed, or even worse, angry.

He watched as the brush rustled not twenty-five yards from where they stood. The bear already knew they were there. Kentucky hunters believed a bear's sense of smell was better than any animal on earth. And they could be one of the most ferocious animals on earth if they were provoked or very hungry.

He wanted to tell Margaret to run back to the house, but if there was more than one bear out there, that could be disastrous. Bears can easily outrun humans. A child in seconds. He couldn't send her up a tree, because bears can also climb trees. Not as well as a mountain lion, but well enough to drag a man or child down.

If it were only him, he'd take on the bear. But he couldn't risk the predator getting near Margaret. He sheathed his knife, pulled his pistol, and fired into the air. He hated to waste the shot when he might need it, but the sound should bring his sons and the other hands running. It might also scare off the bear.

“Grandpapa,” Margaret whimpered, “what is it? A bear?”

“Indeed it is,” he whispered. “Probably the same one that robbed our smokehouse a few nights ago.” The bear thief drug off a valuable ham. A week before that, a bear had attacked the chicken shack in the dead of night creating quite the ruckus as the chickens brawled with the bear in a riotous commotion.

The thieving bear was clearly getting more aggressive. Even though they lived on ten-thousand acres, wild game in the area was getting scarce for both man and beast. This was largely due to all the hungry settlers moving into Kentucky.

“I’m scared,” Margaret said, although Sam could hear surprising strength in her voice.

“It’s normal to be scared. But you must let your courage master your fear.”

“Like when Little John and Rory show a horse who is master?”

“Exactly so. If fear acts up, then you use your courage to settle it down again.”

“Okay, I will try.”

“Good. And that shot will bring your father and uncle and their longrifles,” Sam said as he quickly reloaded. “The three of us have killed more than a few bears in our time. But I’m hoping the sound of my pistol firing will scare it off.”

In truth, based on the movement of the brush, the hungry bear wasn’t giving up. He was circling them. Slowly moving in closer and closer until it decided whether to attack or not.

“Little John!” Rory shouted toward his older brother.

“I heard. Something’s wrong!” Little John yelled back. Father wasn’t hunting. And they’d heard the sound of a pistol firing, not a rifle.

The two brothers took off on the horses they were training, racing toward the woods. A single shot often signaled trouble and

Rory's heart beat faster with worry. His father was still one of the toughest men in Kentucky, but he was getting older. And that made Rory feel even more protective of him.

He glanced over at Little John's concerned face. The last time they saw Father, he was with little Margaret. He hoped his little niece hadn't wandered off and gotten lost in the woods. If she had, perhaps Father went in search of her.

As they raced by the house, Little John's wife, Allison, came running out onto the front porch, her face taut with concern.

"Stay here!" Little John shouted toward her without slowing his mount.

"Where's Margaret?" Allison yelled.

They plunged into the forest and had to slow their horses as the trees thickened, weaving their way through the timber and brush.

"Margaret!" Little John shouted repeatedly.

"Father!" Rory called. When he heard the horrific roar of a threatening bear, and his father's pistol firing again, Rory's blood ran cold. He leaned over the mount's neck and pressed the horse to an even faster run.

Small branches snapped and tore at their clothing and saddles as they plunged forward.

Within seconds they were upon the fight. The bear was clicking its jaw, making blowing noises, and swatting the ground with its huge forepaws. With its massive shoulder muscles and huge head, it was a beautiful creature.

And deadly.

With little Margaret cowering behind him, Father brandished his longknife at the bear again and again and repeatedly shouted, "Away!"

From the dripping blood, Rory could tell that Father's shot hit the bear in the center of its chest, but the pistol's lead ball did not have enough firepower to stop the animal. Bears have a tough hide, heavy muscle, and strong, thick bones. A pistol was a poor weapon against such a powerful animal.

Now both hungry and enraged, the bear's horrific roaring growls and spine-chilling snarls resounded in the forest.

Father still stood protectively in front of his granddaughter.

Bounding on its front paws and moving in big leaps, the wounded animal charged with pure primal rage.

Little John scooped his daughter up onto the saddle in front of him.

Rory flung himself off the horse and lined up the sights on his longrifle. He couldn't afford to miss so he took careful aim at the bear's head because a single shot anywhere else might not stop it and Father stood mere yards away.

He squeezed the trigger. The kick of the rifle smacked against his shoulder.

His heart pounded against his chest with almost as much force.

A second later, the bear crumpled to the forest floor...a couple of feet in front of Father...too close.

Breathing hard, they all stared wide-eyed at the bear for a few moments. Rory was certain it was dead. His shot to the head penetrated the skull, killing the animal instantly. Despite being a black bear, this bear was cinnamon in color, as they sometimes were, and probably a male based on its enormous size.

Accustomed to the sounds of hunting and target practice, both horses remained where they were, but they regarded the bear warily and were prancing skittishly.

Rory quickly snatched up the reins of the horse he'd ridden. "That's a good boy. You did well."

Little John soothed his mount, a young mare, as well and hugged Margaret against his chest. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Yes. Grandpapa said you would come. And if you hadn't, he would have killed that bear with his knife before it could eat me."

"Of that, you can be sure," Little John told her.

"I think he was just hungry," she said. "That's what Grandmama said when the bear ate some of our chickens."

Father glanced back at Rory, his blue eyes intense and his mouth set in a taut line. His father was still breathing heavily and he drew a deep, steadying breath and exhaled before he said, "Nice shot."

"You taught me well," Rory said, although it pleased him to hear the praise. He always wanted to make his father proud.

"We're going back to the house. Your mother will be worried," Little John told Margaret. "And you've had enough adventures for one day."

"Look what Grandpapa made me," she said, proudly holding up a carved animal as Little John turned his mount around.

After they rode away, Father said, "Tie your rope around that bear's hind legs and we'll use that horse to drag him back to the house. He probably won't like it, but it will be good experience for the gelding."

"Indeed. He's still a little green, but he rode well today. I pushed him pretty hard getting to you." He handed the skittish horse's reins to Father and grabbed his rope.

"Looks like we'll have some good meat for Greta to cook up," Father said. Greta was their cook and had been since Rory was a boy.

They all held bear meat in high esteem. It was savory, rather succulent, and tasted not unlike pork. But it was the hide that they valued the most. It made an excellent winter blanket or cloak when tanned properly.

As Rory approached the bear, he could smell a slightly musky odor and sweet scent like grass in the fall when it starts to dry out. While he tied the rope, he asked, "What were you two doing this far from the house?"

Father chuckled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Lingering worry over what could have happened kept Rory from seeing the humor in the situation. "You have to be more careful. We all knew there's been a bear stalking the house lately."

Father's grin quickly evaporated and his brows drew together.

“You’re telling *me* to be careful in the woods?”

His father’s tone surprised Rory. It wasn’t like Father to be sarcastic or mocking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply...”

“Well, you did,” Father snapped.

Rory tied the rope to his saddle, wondering what was bothering his normally even-tempered father.

His father frowned. “I could have taken down that bear with this knife,” he said, placing a hand around the deerhorn handle, “and I’ve done exactly that. Many times. With mountain lions too. And men who deserved to die. A man doesn’t get to be my age living in the wilderness for twenty-five years if he can’t defend himself. I only fired that shot to bring you two here because of Margaret. I didn’t want to chance the bear getting a swipe at her during a fight.”

“That was smart. This bear was clearly hungry and going in for a kill.”

Father nodded. “He was.”

“I know what a formidable fighter you are, Father. I was merely worried for you and Margaret.”

Father sighed heavily. “I shouldn’t have let Margaret wander out here. We were looking for antlers for her reindeer. They had to be just the right size to fit in the holes I’d carved. We went further than I realized. I was caught up in my ponderings.”

“It could have happened to anyone. What were you pondering?”

Father gazed off into the distance. “Adventures.”

The laconic answer seemed to come from deep within his father’s soul.

H

ighland Farm

Near Boonesborough, Kentucky

The day started well with a brilliant and colorful sunrise waking Bear. Now he wanted to go back to bed and start the day over. If only he could.

As soon as he awoke, he reached for Artis, as he always did at sunrise. But she wasn't there and he realized she was away, traveling with Catherine. It felt as if part of himself was missing.

Then, his breakfast had burned and filled the kitchen with a foul odor. When he stooped down to give it to his dog, the back of his favorite pants ripped apart, no doubt unable to hold up to his expanding girth. This was Artis' fault. She was too good of a cook. Perhaps he would lose some weight while she was gone to Boston with Catherine. Then, when he went to get another pair of pants and sat down on the bed to put them on, the bedframe collapsed to the floor. This was his own fault. His desire for his voluptuous wife over their twenty-five years of marriage had finally worn out the bed he'd made himself.

He grinned as he sat there on the floor amid the bedcoverings and the broken bedframe remembering their many nights of passion that resulted in eight children—four sons and four daughters. Most of them were grown now and married with children of their own. Only one son and two daughters remained unmarried—Alexander, who was twenty, Rebecca who was

eighteen, and Julianne who was sixteen.

Both daughters went to Boston with their mother to buy the two girls new wardrobes. They were of the age when stylish clothing mattered a great deal to them. And with his income from his prosperous inn, he and Artis could afford to buy them the best gowns Boston had to offer. Their Aunt Catherine, with a penchant for glamorous gowns, would know just what the two should purchase. And he expected Artis and Ann, who was Daniel's wife, to come home with trunks full of the latest styles too.

Perhaps he should write to Artis and tell her to pick out and order a new bed too while she was in Boston. A fancy carved one. It could be shipped to Boonesborough.

With only a bit of difficulty, he pushed himself up and surveyed the damage. Thankfully, the center of the headboard remained intact. Many years ago, he had carved a triquetra in the center. Also known as a trinity knot, the complete and pointed loops had no start or finish and represented the eternity of their love. The rest of the bed was either ruined or worn. Not much good for anything but firewood now. The bed needed replacing. He would have to sleep in one of the upstairs guestrooms until the new bed arrived.

Bear leaned the headboard against the wall. He would cut the center out, frame it, and hang it for Artis as a remembrance of their many years of happiness in that bed.

He picked up her perfume bottle and sniffed it. The soft fragrance made him miss her. Made him miss the feel of her skin against his hand. And the feel of her beautiful hair brushing against his cheek. Instead of turning gray, her red hair only faded with age through a glorious spectrum of faded copper to a rosy-blond color.

It was going to be a long few months. Why did he ever agree to let her go? Perhaps because he knew Catherine needed Artis in her time of mourning her mother's death.

With his pants replaced and backside now covered, he strode

out to the main room and looked around. It was too quiet with everyone gone. He was so unaccustomed to quiet that he found the silence unnerving. Although orphaned at an early age, he'd grown up with the five boisterous Wyllie brothers, so he was accustomed to a lot of racket and activity. And as each of his own children arrived, their home grew noisier. The only silence he experienced now was when he was hunting.

He decided to attempt breakfast again and marched into the kitchen. It still stank. "Nay, I'll be eatin' in town," he told himself.

He went back for the headboard and then stored it in his work shed. He would create the wall hanging out of it that afternoon. He was never one to put off what needed doing, even if he would have to wait several months to give it to his wife.

With his stomach growling now, he went outside to saddle his favorite horse and noticed that even the dog wouldn't eat his cooking. It still sat there on the grass looking even more unappetizing. Maybe the buzzards wouldn't be so picky.

He tossed the saddle over Whiskey, an especially tall and muscular bay with a black mane and tail. The gelding came by his name because he was the rich reddish-brown color of Kentucky bourbon. A big horse was a requirement for him because he was a man, like many Highlanders, of unusual height and size.

The glorious day made the thirty-minute ride into town seem short. He sometimes missed the days when he was in the saddle all day, riding alongside Captain Sam and Stephen. They were the two brothers most like him. John, Edward, and William had always been more scholarly with their heads more often in books, although when needed the three could well defend themselves. But it had been Sam, Stephen, and himself, who kept them all alive on their journey to Kentucky more than twenty-five years ago.

When they first arrived, Boonesborough was largely a lead and arrow scarred fort surrounded by a few businesses and roughhewn homes. Over the last twenty-five years, the town thrived. They now had a general store, three taverns, two churches, a boatyard, ferry,

warehouse and mill, and two factories, among other businesses. And a good number of elegant and stately homes. The landing on the Kentucky River had become a major departure point for flatboats loaded with produce, cargos of bourbon, and other goods bound for New Orleans.

Normally, Bear would eat at his own tavern at his large inn, but he decided to visit his competition. He tied Whiskey in front of Holder's Tavern. The owner, Jonathan Holder, and Bear enjoyed a friendly rivalry over which tavern served the best ale and food.

Captain Holder was one of the defenders of Fort Boonesborough and later became commander of the fort. Holder married Fanny Callaway, a daughter of Col. Richard Callaway, one of the founders of Boonesborough. Fanny, along with her sister Betsy, and Jemima Boone, Daniel Boone's daughter, had been captured by the Shawnee in 1776. Holder, Boone, and a group of men from the fort pursued and rescued the girls.

Holder delighted in his renown as a cursing man, often casting forth loud and creative curses. This caused the town's residents with more sensitive ears and sensibilities to frequent Bear's establishment instead.

The wonderful scents of bacon and fresh biscuits greeted Bear as he came in.

"How the hell and Kentucky are you, Bear?" asked Holder.

Bear chuckled and told the habitual swearer, "It would be more becomin' to greet a man without swearin', John."

"I ain't interested in being bloody becoming. I'm too old to worry about being charming."

"Well then, to answer yer question, I am verra well and more than a wee bit hungry his fine mornin'."

"Already missing your lovely Artis' cooking, are you?"

Bear guessed that by this time the entire town knew that Artis had left. News on the frontier traveled faster than a strong north wind. "Aye, I am. I burned my breakfast."

"Have a seat and we'll fix you right up with a mouth-watering

meal that will fill up even a man of your mammoth size.”

“A coffee first would be appreciated, good Sir.”

Holder motioned one of his servers over. “Coffee for my friend.”

Bear found a seat by the hearth. Even though no fire burned in it this warm morning, there was something comforting about a hearth, even a cold one. Perhaps hearths reminded him of his native Scotland. He’d spent many a night when he was young in front of his family’s hearth where they burned peat moss. They’d been happy there until the Highland Clearances forced his parents and him to leave for America. But he lost them both to fevers on the voyage.

One of Holder’s servers poured him a mug of coffee and Bear inhaled the fragrant aroma.

“Your usual?” Holder asked.

“Aye.”

Holder instructed his server, a plump young lady with a freckled face, “Bring Mr. Wyllie a serving of eggs and ham fitting a man of his size.”

“Right away, Sir,” the server said.

“And a pile of biscuits too,” Holder added. “And don’t be eatin’ any more yourself!”

The embarrassed young woman fled with her cheeks burning.

“What do you hear from Captain Sam?” Holder asked and took a seat. “Is your brother burning his breakfast too?”

“Nay, he has a good cook there and his daughter-in-law, Allison. They’ll be sure he eats well enough.”

“Perhaps you should go stay with Sam until Artis returns,” Holder suggested. “With Alexander working in town, you’ll likely get bloody lonely in that big quiet house. Out there in those blasted woods, you’re too cut off from people.”

Bear had to admit, he was already feeling lonely. Perhaps visiting Sam wasn’t such a bad idea. He was surprised he hadn’t thought of it himself. “Ye know, John, ’tis na such a bad idea.”

“Hell, if I were you I’d get there faster than buttered lead.”

Just as his meal arrived, Bear’s brother, William strode in. His handsome blond brother had been sheriff of Boonesborough for many years before becoming a lawyer, the most respected one in the county.

“I saw Whiskey tied outside,” William said as he pulled a chair out at the table, scraping the chair legs across the wooden floor. “Thought I’d join you.”

Holder got up and told William he would have coffee brought over.

“I was goin’ to come see you as soon as I finished my breakfast,” Bear told him. “How’s the wife and family?”

“All good. Kelly already misses Artis.”

Bear frowned and nodded. “So do I.” After covering them with pepper, he plunged a fork into the fried eggs and then cut a piece of the thick ham slice.

“I’m sure you miss Daniel, Ann, Rebecca, and Julianne too,” William said. “Why don’t you come and have dinner with us tonight at our place? You can spend the night and return home in the morning.”

William and Kelly lived very close to Bear. Their cabin was nestled in an idyllic setting among rolling, tree-covered hills. Hills that Kelly swore whispered to her whenever there was a soft breeze.

“I just had dinner at your place three nights ago, after they all left. I thank ye, but I’m thinkin’ I might like to go visit Sam for a while.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. When?”

“I thought to leave early in the morn. My inn manager can take over for me.”

“I could keep an eye on things for you too,” William volunteered. And I have power of attorney over your affairs if anything needs to be signed or taken care of while you’re gone.”

“Aye, and I trust ye to make wise decisions for me. But why

don't ye come with me? We could have a fine time drinkin' whiskey with Sam and his sons again." Although they were both grown men, he couldn't wait to wrap his arms around his nephews, Little John and Rory, and hug the lads.

"I wish I could. I'm in the middle of two important cases right now. Besides I wouldn't want to leave Kelly alone."

"I do na blame ye. Kentucky can still be wild from time to time."

"You should ask Alexander to go with you," William suggested.

"Aye, I could. It would be good for the boy to get out from behind that bloody boring desk."

"Bear, he's no longer a boy. He just turned twenty."

"Aye, and 'tis why he needs more experience in the wild. He knows a wee bit about shooting and hunting, but he's only brought back wee rabbits and squirrels. 'Tis time he learned to hunt something with teeth."

Alexander was Bear's only unmarried son and also worked in town at the family's inn, a two and a half-story, five-bay log and stone building in a Georgian style. The original section was built in 1799, and since then, Bear had expanded the structure twice. They were nearly always fully occupied, and the inn provided a dependable income.

Alexander was responsible for all the finances, bookkeeping, orders, and correspondence for both the tavern and the inn. "He's been trainin' an assistant. Perhaps he's become knowledgeable enough to take over for Alexander."

"I've met the young man Alexander is training. He seems honest and reliable," William said. "And if he has questions, I can help him."

Bear buttered his fourth biscuit. "He'd better be honest. His father is the sheriff in Bourbon County."

"Did you hear about our sheriff's deputy?" William asked.

"Nay, what about him?"

"He had a stroke. Couldn't move his entire left side. Then his

heart failed and he died yesterday.”

Bear shook his head. “Bless his soul. Wasn’t he about our age?”

William nodded. “Yes.”

Bear scowled and said, “Why does life go so fast and take so much?”

“Sometimes, it’s because we let it,” William said.

Alexander knew the way to Uncle Sam's place well, having made the day and a half journey numerous times over the years. But today would be the first time he would make the journey with just his father and that excited him. With seven brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and innumerable nieces, nephews, and cousins, it was rare indeed for him to get to spend time alone with his Da.

It would also be a chance to trade quill and ink for a knife and rifle. He needed more time in the saddle too. Having spent most of his life either studying or working in an office, he relished the prospect of a long ride, followed by an extended visit with his uncle and cousins.

"I've spent many years in the wild and ye must listen to me always if ye're to stay safe on our journey," Father told him as they deposited their traveling saddlebags in the kitchen before the sun even grayed the sky.

"Aye, I will," Alexander promised. He could have just said yes, but with two parents of Scots heritage, Alexander had picked up on many of their speech patterns.

"Ye look good in those new leathers. Now ye do na look so bookish."

As soon as Da told him they were going on this trip, he was both eager and dismayed. He didn't have the proper clothing for a long trip astride a horse. Everything he owned was fine linen, silk, or wool. So, Alexander had bought himself two pairs of durable

leather breeches, two buckskin shirts, a brown leather hat, and sturdy tall boots.

“Thanks. They feel good too,” he said running a hand down one sleeve. “Much better than itchy woolens. And I needed a new pair of boots anyway. My old ones had grown tight.”

Da chuckled. “Aye, lad. Yer feet are now as big as mine.”

Alexander hoped that someday his shoulders might be as broad as his father’s too. At least he’d grown to the same height—a touch under six and a half feet. But his long limbs made him feel gangly and awkward. He definitely needed more muscle on his bones. And he feared too much time indoors made him appear pale. At least he had his mother’s brilliant green eyes and golden-red hair.

They hastily closed and latched all the shutters and then locked and barred the front door since they would be going out the back door.

“I’ve packed enough food and coffee for at least four days,” Da told him.

“Why? It’s not that far to Uncle Sam’s place. We should arrive early in the day tomorrow.”

“A wise man always has at least a few extra days of provisions in case of unforeseen delays.”

“That does make sense.”

His father gave him a slantways smile. “See lad, ye’ve learned somethin’ already.”

He gave Snow the leftovers from their breakfast, which was quite a lot since Alexander had been too excited to eat much. “Are we taking Snow or will he stay with William and Kelly?” he asked as he washed their plates and forks.

“Aye, he comes along. If we do na, he’ll likely follow us anyway. That dog always knows when I’ll be gone for a while.”

“He has a new collar.”

Da nodded. “I’ve hidden a good deal of money inside that belt around his neck. I shortened that money belt to fit his neck.”

“Why are you taking a good amount of money? We won’t need

it there.”

“A light purse makes a heavy heart. A man should always have plenty coin. At least enough to buy a good horse if yours dies or becomes lame. And a good rifle if yours becomes damaged.”

“How would your rifle get damaged?”

“Any number of ways. I once used a rifle fightin’ off a particularly disagreeable bear. Hit him between the eyes. The rifle broke in two, but the bear passed out and stayed out long enough for me to make my escape.” For an instant, Father’s expression held a wistfulness, as though he were remembering the bear fight with a certain fondness.

Alexander laughed. “I don’t doubt that the bear dropped under your assault.”

“Aye, he did, like a drunken Scotsman.”

“But why put your money around Snow’s neck?”

“’Tis safer with him than on us or the horses. As ye know, he never lets a stranger touch him. If they try, he growls and bares his teeth lookin’ as mean as the devil himself.”

“But what if Snow runs off or gets lost?”

“He’s always found us, hasn’t he? Unlike men, a dog’s loyalty, once established, never wavers.”

“He is a loyal one.” Alexander nodded and patted the family’s sizeable, all-white dog on his big head. “Looks like you’ll be our banker on this trip, Snow.”

Snow wagged his tail vigorously and gazed up at them with his big brown eyes.

Next, Da armed himself with an assortment of weapons from the family’s armory cabinet. His father seemed excited to be making the journey too. After all the stories Alexander had heard his father tell of his oldest brother, a former captain and a hero in the Continental Army, he already knew how much Uncle Sam meant to his father. And, how much Da admired Sam for his bravery and fierceness against an enemy. The man was a legend among Kentuckians. So was Alexander’s father.

Alexander was in awe of both men. His father, a born warrior who possessed a keen ability to see his enemies' weaknesses, had great strength and size. And Uncle Sam, whose intense blue eyes missed nothing, was born to be a commander of warriors. Also a large, tall man, he was uniquely wise, intelligent, and a skilled fighter.

Sam's son, Little John, after spending years fighting bravely in Kentucky's militia, had earned a reputation as one of the finest horse breeders and trainers in the country. Little John's brother Rory, who was closer to Alexander's own age, was a fine man as well. Rory knew how to handle himself in the wild. With limitless confidence, Rory was often the winner of their family shooting contests and horse races, held twice-yearly.

Only Alexander, of all Bear's sons and nephews, had a reputation as an easy-going intellectual. In truth, his reputation was well deserved. He was only a tolerable rider. He readily admitted to being a pitiable hunter. And his skills with weapons were mediocre at best. But he wasn't spineless. He could stand up for himself when needed. At least he thought so. In truth, he'd never really been tested.

His Da and even his Ma and Uncle William had all tried to teach him those skills, but none of it had been a priority for him, and he never enjoyed practicing. Like all skills, improvement required practice. And interest.

It was time he changed. For pity's sake, he turned twenty years old on his birthday last week. He was a man now, at least according to the calendar. And he'd grown tired of sitting at a desk all day. He'd grown tired of his soft, ink-stained hands. Most of all, embarrassment gripped him whenever the young ladies in town walked past him with no more than a polite nod. They never smiled at him. They never made eye contact. They never showed any interest in him. It was downright humiliating. Did they still think of him as a gangly boy?

It was time to become a man his Da could be proud of.

And a man a woman could admire. Or at least notice.

“Put these pistols and sheaths on your belt,” Da said. “And from now on, be sure both are loaded at all times.” Then his father started making a stack of other weapons—a hatchet, a knife, and a sgian-dubh, a small, single-edged knife that could be concealed in a boot. Lastly, he placed a longrifle on the table, a powder horn, and a pouch of lead balls. “These are yours for our journey.”

Alexander stared at the pile. “Do I really need all those?”

“Take care of them and they will take care of ye.”

Alexander nodded and started adding the weapons to his body just as his father had done and hanging the straps for the powder horn and ball pouch across his chest. Then he picked up the longrifle. When he finished donning the weapons, he felt considerably heavier and a sense of security filled him. Even if it was false confidence, at least he *looked* like he could defend himself. He stood a little taller and straightened his back.

Da nodded approvingly. “Now ye look like a man equipped for a journey into the wilderness.”

“Will you help me become a man who is more than just equipped?”

His father studied Alexander’s face for a moment before replying. “What brought about this? Ye’ve never shown any interest before.”

Alexander decided to say what was on his heart. “I want to make you proud of me. And someday to make a woman proud of me.”

“I am already proud of ye, lad. But to make a woman proud of you, ye must first make yerself proud of ye—of the kind of man ye are. And, aye I will teach ye the skills of a man. But it will neither be easy nor painless.”

“On my honor, I will do what I must. I’m sorry I’ve shown little interest before now. I always felt as though ye were focused on my older brothers, so I decided to focus my efforts on being a scholar. Maybe now that they’re all gone and married, you can focus on

teaching me.”

Da narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to the side as he regarded him.

At once, Alexander’s insides tightened. He never feared his father, but he intensely disliked angering him.

“Being a scholar and being a strong man are not incompatible. I was also a scholar when I was your age,” Da told him.

“You were?”

“Aye. I read every book I could get my hands on when I was young. Your uncles often sought me out for my wisdom. They still do. Especially William since he lives here in Boonesborough with us.”

Alexander knew that was true. William often discussed difficult cases with Da. He exhaled a breath of relief. “That makes me feel better.”

“It should. No warrior on earth is as powerful as a smart man who uses his head.”

“I’ve always admired both you and Uncle Sam. You’re both very smart and very deadly. I want to be like you two.”

“Then let’s quit blatherin’. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us. Go brush and then saddle our horses. I fed them both earlier.”

“Are you sure Whiskey won’t bite me?”

“Nay, I’m not. He can sometimes be a beast. I’d advise ye to keep a careful watch. If he does bite, give him a quick thump on the muzzle or smack him with an open palm. It won’t hurt him. ‘Tis just discipline. Ye have to show a horse who is master.”

Alexander didn’t like the idea of hitting the horse. “How can I keep him from biting?”

“Don’t tighten the girth or cinch too quickly or too much. If ye do, he may lash out. A horse needs to be confident that it won’t be hurt as ye’re saddlin’ up and ridin’. When ye put the headstall over his head, try not to touch his ears. Whiskey dislikes having his ears folded. And talk to him in a friendly way from the moment ye go out there.”

Alexander did exactly as his father said, and Whiskey never attempted to take a chunk out of him. His own horse, a mare named Lady, was never a problem. She always stood there with a drooping head while she was saddled. And not once since he'd owned her had she acted up. As he had several times over the last year, he adjusted the stirrup down a notch so it would hang longer.

When he finished, he led the horses close to the back door. He never noticed how much taller Whiskey was than Lady until they stood there side by side. Whiskey made Lady look like a pony. He frowned, knowing the contrast was just as striking between his father and him.

"Horses are ready," he called into the house.

His father emerged carrying all their bags, and once again, Alexander marveled at his father's strength. They tied their saddlebags, bedrolls, food, and longrifles onto the saddles. Then Da checked Whiskey's girth strap and tightened it. "In the short walk from the horse shed, the girth loosened because Whiskey relaxed," Da said. "Check Lady's too."

Alexander checked, but the strap was still snug on his horse. "Still tight."

His father's bushy eyebrows drew together. "That horse is too relaxed. She's okay for short rides into town. But that mare is getting older, and she's too easy-going."

"Why is being calm a problem?" he asked as his father chained and locked their back door and then hid the key in the usual place.

"A calm, lackadaisical horse is what ye want for a child or an inexperienced rider. But a man needs a man's horse—a valiant, strong horse. One as courageous as he is. When ye set off into the wilderness, neither horse nor rider should be relaxed. A horse can alert ye to danger. Their senses are far keener than ours. Both horse and rider must keep a careful watch and be prepared to act. And ye must be ever vigilant, both day and night. Vigilance is a man's sharpest weapon."

"I'll keep that in mind." Alexander thought his father was being

overly wary, exaggerating the danger. The woods of Kentucky were no longer the dangerous place they once were. “Are ye ready?” he asked.

His father threw his bulk over his horse’s broad back. “Aye. I’m ready for a grand adventure. Are ye?”

“Indeed. More than ready.” Alexander mounted and settled into the saddle. His long legs hung down past the horse’s belly.

Da noticed and laughed jovially. “Lad, I think ye’ve outgrown more than your boots. That wee horse is too small for ye. Do na worry, yer Uncle Sam will get ye fixed up with a proper horse.”

As the sun’s rays poured over the eastern horizon, their mounts and Snow took their first steps toward Cumberland Falls Horse Farm to the south.

Alexander hoped he was also taking his first steps toward true manhood.

N*acogdoches, Province of Coahuila and Texas, Mexico*

Early May 1824

Jessica prayed for an interruption. Anything to distract her from the empty-headed man who sat at the table in front of her at the town's nicest café, the Yellow Rose. The café got its name from a rose, of an intensely vivid yellow color, that grew wild alongside many of the town's buildings and along the trails of Texas. But the dew was off the bloom here inside the café. She no longer found Donny Farley exciting, novel, or interesting. Quite the opposite. He was a bore.

Since she was too polite to hurl the truth at him, she continued to endure his shallow, never-ending comments.

Donny and his father had recently moved to the town, so she had accepted the invitation to dinner without knowing much about him other than the fact that he came from a respectable family, and he was well-mannered. With his mustache, he looked more like a gambler than a banker. His height was about six feet, and he was muscular and compact. His hair and brows were very dark above his gunmetal gray eyes. He was neat and stylish in his attire, and his small feet were clad in boots made of a light material, uncommon for the frontier.

But none of that polish was enough to overcome his ruinous flaw. The man possessed no emotional or intellectual depth. His nonstop chatter reminded her of the old saying, 'A shallow brook

babbles the loudest.’ Only interested in what he had to say, he didn’t even ask, much less listen to, her ideas and opinions. She found that downright intolerable. She wanted to share her ideas and views about important concepts and topics like freedom, democracy, slavery, and literature. And she wanted to share them with someone who cared what she thought. Someone who appreciated her mind as well as her body.

Donny pointed a well-manicured finger toward another table across the room. “That fellow over there, the one with the perfectly tailored suit, is the wealthiest man in town. Father says so, so it must be true.” Donny’s father was the town’s new banker and evidently, the man was careless with private information.

She glanced over her right shoulder. “I know who he is. He’s the father of my best friend, Rebecca. Mr. Tyler is far more than a wealthy man. He is a kind, loving, godly gentleman who treats his family and employees well. I have great respect and admiration for him.”

After falling deeply in love, her friend Rebecca had recently married a truly fine young man named Steve Wyllie, one of Stephen Wyllie’s three sons. Steve and Rebecca would be starting a horse farm soon and likely a family. Her best friend’s lovely wedding last month had made Jessica think about her own marriage prospects a lot lately. That was one reason she’d agreed to meet Donny for dinner tonight. But after spending time with him, she decided she would rather be a spinster forever than marry a man like Donny.

Her attention returned to Donny who was saying, “Did you hear ...”

Gossip, gossip, gossip, she thought. Her mind wandered again as he droned on and on about the latest scandal. Donny was a handsome man, but his love of gossip and meaningless hooey made it difficult for her to even look at the man. Especially when he spoke while chewing his food. She rubbed her forehead and studied the small vase of yellow roses on the table as he continued

to blather.

Unable to listen to the rumormonger any longer, when he took a breath, she asked, "What is your opinion of the political unrest here in Texas? Do you believe Anglo interactions with Mexican officials will improve or deteriorate further?"

Just before Steve Wyllie married Rebecca, he and his family courageously exposed the corruption of the local Alcalde. With the appointment of the new Alcalde, José Antonio Navarro, she and her father and other residents of the town hoped that dealings with Mexican officials would improve.

"I don't keep up with all that nonsense," Donny said. "I leave all that up to the politicians."

"Don't you read the newspaper?" she asked.

"No, I don't like reading newspapers. They're filled with bad news and boring politics."

How different he was from her. She read every newspaper she could. They were filled with all kinds of information and they recorded history. Newspapers, even though they were few and sometimes far between, were of incalculable importance to the citizens of Nacogdoches and the whole of the province. Since word of mouth was notoriously unreliable, they were the only way news and current facts about their lives could be accurately shared and recorded.

She worried though whether the new printer in town, Mr. Slocum, would be able to honestly report the news. The printer recently told her father that he had been required to take the oath required of printers not to disturb the peace with sedition or incite citizens to rebellion. Promoting American patriotism was also frowned upon. Clearly, the oath requirement indicated that Mexico was already worried about an uprising.

"Well don't you talk to other men about the issues of the day?" she asked.

Donny shook his head and then chuckled. "When I speak with other men, it's usually about women. That's how I learned who the

most beautiful woman in town was.”

She peered at him questioningly.

“You, of course. A man like me needs a beautiful woman to accompany him to functions.”

“Why?” she asked. “To simply look beautiful or to share her thoughts on important issues too?”

Donny cleared his throat. “To be charming and reflect well on me, which you are quite capable of doing. Although you’ll need to improve your wardrobe.”

Fuming at the intentional affront, Jessica decided to argue with him further was pointless.

As their meal and his drivel thankfully drew to an end, he smiled and said, “Jessica. I asked you to dinner tonight because I want to court you. I know this will please you. I intend to speak to your father soon as well.” He drew one of the yellow roses out of the vase on their table and handed it to her.

As the rose’s stem dripped water onto the table, Jessica’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. She raised a palm to stop him from handing it to her. “Donny, I’m sorry, but that does not please me. I feel we are not compatible.”

“But, but...but,” he sputtered. “I’m one of the most eligible bachelors in Nacogdoches. My father is a wealthy banker and yours is just a general store operator.”

Her jaw hardened. “I’m aware of all that. I can only repeat, we are not well-matched.”

“But why?” he whined.

What could she say without hurting his feelings? “We are just not compatible. And I guess I am not ready to be courted.”

She wasn’t. Her father needed her too much. They only had each other. She could never desert him and live with another. She wasn’t some silly damsel who wanted nothing more than a husband.

Someday, she would be interested in a courtship. Just not now and not by Donny. It had to be someone who could deeply consider

subjects of thought or knowledge. Someone with insight or understanding and common sense. The only man she'd met remotely like that was a mousy, easily frightened young man with bad teeth. The good-looking men in town seemed incapable of holding a conversation that didn't include a good deal of gibberish and often foul language. A conversation with them left her feeling bumfuzzled and frustrated. And bored to tears.

Perhaps she was the one being shallow. But someday, when she was ready to be courted, she would find a spirited man who was both intellectually and physically attractive to her. None of us are perfect, but surely somewhere out there was a man of depth and courage with at least a pleasing face.

"Well, I have to say I'm shocked," Donny said with a huff. "I thought we were well-suited and likeminded."

If only you had a mind we might be, she thought before she could stop herself. "I'm afraid we are not suited. Thank you for the lovely dinner. I will see myself home."

"Well, I guess I'll let you since your home is just across the street. If you can call living above a store a home."

How dare he! The pompous ass lived with his father in one of the largest and nicest homes in the town. But that didn't give him the right to disparage her home. His scornful condescension made her temper flare. She shoved her chair backward with a good deal of force and tossed her napkin onto the table. "Yes, it is a home. A fine and comfortable home and I'm proud to share it with my father. Goodnight, Mr. Farley."

She made her way across the room to Mr. and Mrs. Tyler's table. "Good evening," she told them, trying to shake off her anger.

"Good evening, Jessica!" they both said at once.

"How are Rebecca and Steve doing? Have they returned home from their honeymoon in Louisiana?" Jessica knew that Steve and Rebecca planned to live in the upstairs portion of Mr. and Mrs. Tyler's grand home until they got their own home built. From what she knew of Steve and his ambition, she didn't think that would

take long. He was an excellent breeder and trainer of horses. And his father, Stephen Wyllie, and brother, Samuel, were establishing the area's first cattle operation. Both enterprises would be combined into Wyllie Cattle and Horse Company and would be located nearby on ten-thousand acres that formerly belonged to Mr. Tyler.

"Yes, the newlyweds came home late yesterday. All smiles," Mr. Tyler said.

Mrs. Tyler nodded her agreement. "They are so happy."

"Excellent! Please tell Rebecca I will give her another day to settle in and I'll come to see her day after tomorrow, about midmorning."

"I will tell her," Mrs. Tyler said.

"And tell her I'll expect some of her delicious doughnuts," Jessica said with a grin. "And I'd enjoy some of your excellent coffee, Mrs. Tyler."

"You'll have to fight me for Rebecca's doughnuts," Mr. Tyler said with a warm grin.

"I've never run from a challenge," Jessica told him. "I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Mrs. Tyler reached out for Jessica's hand, leaned her head toward her, and lowered her voice. "Jessica, you're not going to let that haughty young man court you, are you?"

"No, he wanted to court me. But I just told him I wasn't interested."

"Too often, the smaller the mind, the greater the conceit," Mr. Tyler said quietly. "His father is just like him. Supercilious and snobbish."

"I'm afraid I need more in a man. Much more."

"You are both a beautiful *and* wise young woman," Mr. Tyler said.

Jessica chuckled, bid them goodnight, and then left the café.

Crossing the town's main thoroughfare, the El Camino Real, she made her way to her father's large general store, called Harrison's,

as the sun edged close to the western horizon. Wagons and horses passed by going in both directions. The road connected Nacogdoches to the town's sister city, Natchitoches, in nearby Louisiana. Lately, the road was especially busy because of all the settlers who fled inland to escape the terrible spring floodwaters of both the Red and Sabine Rivers. Many of those people had settled in Nacogdoches, giving the town a far greater number of Anglo settlers than there were Mexican residents.

The sudden increase in population coupled with a flood of immigrants from the states had been a boon to businesses in town, especially her father's general store. Pa was forced to hire several new store clerks to help. And lately, she spent a good deal of her time behind the counter tallying up customers' bills since she was especially good at math.

As she climbed the outside staircase, disappointed once again, she sighed. It was just her father and her living in the spacious and well-furnished quarters above the store. A year after she was born, her mother had died giving birth to a stillborn, and her heartbroken father had never remarried. He would already be asleep since he rose so early to get Harrison's ready each morning, so she unlocked and closed the door quietly. Always thoughtful, Pa had left an oil lamp on for her so she didn't have to stumble around in the darkness. The soft light gave the room a cozy feel.

Tonight, like so many other nights, would be quiet and lonely. She would ready herself for bed and then spend a couple of hours reading. She loved to read, but she was ready to do more than read about life. She desperately wanted to experience it. She sat down on her bed and unlaced her dress boots, deciding just what she wanted.

Excitement.

Enjoyment.

A big family.

Love. Love most of all.

Someday, she would meet the right man. He would be

handsome, courageous, smart, have a strong character, and be capable of carrying on a stimulating conversation. And if the chap could make her laugh once in a while, perhaps even every day, that would be ideal.

She just had to have faith. And hope.

Bear and his oldest brother sat down in big leather chairs in front of Sam's large hearth. Both of them held a generous glass of Kentucky bourbon, a smooth, sophisticated reddish-brown whiskey that Bear could tell had been aged in charred oak barrels. Whiskey was already an important commodity in Kentucky and sometimes used in place of money to pay expenses. As a preventative, most people believed bourbon to be good for snake bites, fallen arches, chills, fever, women's complaints, and babies' ills. But was it good for melancholy? Although Sam seemed glad to see him and Alexander when they arrived, his brother wasn't himself. Even now, Sam's gaze bounced around making him appear restless and distracted.

Although Alexander was saddle sore from their trip here, he was out at the barn with Rory and Little John. His son had asked his cousins to teach him how to become a better rider. Little John and Rory were making the lad lap a spirited horse at a gallop in a large round pen built for that purpose. While Little John called pointers to him, Alexander circled the pen over and over again. They would keep going until the horse finally tired. The exercise would be good for both the horse and Alexander.

"Tis a braw whiskey," Bear said, holding up his glass to admire the rich color.

"I traded Noah Craig a horse for a dozen cases," Sam said. His deep, mellow voice was edged with something else.

"Ye seem troubled," Bear said. "What has yer mind wanderin'?"

through a thicket of thorns?" They'd always been able to talk to each other so he intended to find out what was wrong.

Sam took a sip and then nodded. "I thought growing older would take longer."

"Aye. The other day I started wonderin' where my life went. I don't even remember a lot of the years."

"Sometimes it's good not to remember things."

Sam was likely referring to the Revolutionary War. The years his brother spent as a cavalry soldier and captain left both physical and mental scars. That was one reason Sam had wanted to come to Kentucky, a place on the edge of a vast wilderness. A place where he could forget the horrors of war.

Bear stared up at the hearth's polished wood mantel. He had carved it many years ago when he helped Sam build this impressive home. The six-foot plank was a good four inches thick. He remembered carrying it in and positioning it precisely where Catherine wanted it. For most men carrying the heavy mantel would have been a job for two. But his shoulders and arms could handle the weight then with no difficulty. He'd always been a strong man, but the lifting and hauling he'd done helping Sam build both the house and barn had made him even more so. Could he lift the mantel now, he wondered?

Sam gulped his drink. "We're old men, aren't we?" It was both a question and an admission.

"Only by the calendar," Bear said. "Ye do na look old. Ye've only got a wee bit of gray on that big head of yours. And ye appear to be as strong as ever." His brother's wavy hair, mostly dark with some salty streaks, hung to his broad, still squared shoulders. As he always did, Sam wore buckskins that were a light gold color and knee-high rugged moccasins covered his feet instead of leather boots. But there were lines now on Sam's rugged face. And flecks of gray steel in his blue eyes mirrored the years. Years spent mostly outdoors working hard to build this horse farm into one of the finest in Kentucky.

“The calendar doesn’t lie, Bear.”

Bear couldn’t deny the truth of that. He needed a good swig himself and he took it before he said, “I bet we could both still thrash whoever needed thrashin’.”

Sam half-heartedly muttered his agreement.

Bear sat there recollecting the many times the two of them fought side by side against Indian raiders, bandit gangs, murdering buffalo hunters, and other threats. “Twenty-five years ago, Kentucky was a paradise full of devils. Devils that needed men like us to send them where they belonged.”

Sam shook his head and sighed deeply. “Twenty-five years ago! Those years evaporated as fast as a cup of water left in the hot sun. Is there anything more fleeting than time?”

“Nay! And nothin’ is more precious than time. Wealth and success mean nothing if a man has na time to enjoy it. Or if he doesna *take* the time to enjoy it. To find things to look forward to.”

“And what do we have to look forward to over the next few months?” Sam asked.

“Our wives are gone,” Bear said with a grin, “so not much.”

Sam tossed back the rest of his whiskey and seemed to grow even more thoughtful as he gazed blankly into the empty glass.

Bear poured him more. Whiskey may not be a cure for melancholy, but it failed more agreeably than most other things.

“Sam, ye and me, we’ve come to the age when we can look backward on life and appreciate it. But we must also look forward and make the most of the time we have.”

Sam turned in his chair to face him directly. “Exactly,” he said with enthusiasm finally in his voice. “That’s why we should both go to Texas.”

Bear’s heart leapt within his chest. “Texas? To see Stephen and his boys?”

“If not now, then when?” Sam asked. “Clearly, Stephen has found it difficult to leave. And considering what they’ve been through and continue to go through, I don’t blame him.”

“Aye. He has seen his share of challenges. His letters remind me of when we first came to Kentucky. Texas must be a place as wild as it is beautiful. I think yer right. If we’re to see him again before we die of old age, we’ll likely have to go to him.”

“Think about it. It’s the perfect time to go. The weather will be warm with few storms this time of year. And our wives won’t be back for months.”

“Hopefully by Christmas.” Bear didn’t like the idea of Artis not being there to share in their annual celebration and family gathering.

“Catherine isn’t here to talk me out of going. And Artis isn’t here to keep you from going. You know she would. When the woman is mad she has enough spark in her to set the whole of Kentucky on fire.”

“Aye, she does. I wouldna want to argue with her about this.”

“By the time they get a letter from us telling them where we’ve gone, we could be in Texas. It will take about a month to get there and a month to get back,” Sam said with excitement. “That would give us a month or two with Stephen. We’d get to meet our nephew’s wives. And Samuel’s new son.”

“Aye, Samuel named the bairn after Stephen.”

Sam’s eyes brightened with excitement. “And we’d get to see what lies west of Kentucky. I’ve always wanted to do that. At times, I’ve envied Stephen because he wasn’t afraid to go see what lies over the horizon.”

Bear nodded. “I have as well. But the journey would likely be dangerous. We’re na young pups like we were when we came to Kentucky.”

“But there’s still a lot of life left in us. We both have skill with weapons, strength of mind and body, and absolute fearlessness.”

“Aye, I feel the same,” Bear said. “Ye are both very clever and very deadly. And na man has better instincts.”

Sam sat forward. “I’ll have your back and you’ll have mine. That’s enough for me. There’s no man on earth I’d trust more to be

there if I needed help.”

“I swore an oath to yer dear departed mother to protect my adopted brothers. ’Twill be my honor and duty to do so on this journey.”

“You swore an oath to her?”

“Aye. ’Twas when she and yer father, God bless their restin’ souls, said they would adopt me. She said she would treat me as one of her own sons and only asked one thing of me.”

“And that was?”

“That as long as I lived, I would do everythin’ in me power to protect ye. And I swore to her that I would.”

“That explains why you have always been so protective of us—William, Edward, Stephen, and me.”

“And John too while he lived. To this day, I still feel guilty that we could na save him.”

“I sometimes do as well,” Sam said with a deep sigh. “John would be proud though of the man Little John has become.”

“Aye, he would be. And ’tis because ye’ve been a good father to our brother’s boy.”

The more they talked and drank, the more Bear liked the idea of a journey to Texas. In truth, he didn’t just like the idea. His soul began to relish it. His feet were already itching to go. It would be a chance to prove themselves again.

Little John’s wife, Allison came down the stairs with her daughter, Margaret. Displaying identical and beautiful smiles, they both wore fresh dresses in the same cornflower blue color.

“Uncle Bear!” Margaret squealed when she caught sight of him. “You’ve come inside!”

“Aye, lass.”

“I was taking a bath and getting my hair washed,” Margaret explained. “Mother said she’d braid it after it dried.”

“I’m going to go help Greta with dinner preparations,” Allison said. “Can you two old grandpas keep an eye on this lively young lady for me?”

“Just who are ye callin’ old, lassie?” Bear asked Allison.

“We may be grandpas, but we’re still in our prime!” Sam said.

“I’d have to agree,” Allison said with a chuckle. “But this little one can be a handful when she forgets that she’s a young lady, not a wild animal.”

“I’ll act tame for them,” Margaret promised her mother as Allison strode toward the kitchen at the rear of the large house.

Margaret climbed onto Bear’s lap. “I think you need a bath and hair wash too.”

Bear laughed deeply. “Aye. I’m certain I do after a day and a half in Whiskey’s saddle.”

“Grandpapa, did you tell Granduncle Bear that you are going to Texas?”

“I told him I was thinking about it and I asked him what he thought of the idea. By the way, Bear, it was my little Squirrel who came up with the idea of my going to Texas.”

Bear’s eyes widened. “Ye did?”

“Aye,” she said, imitating him. “Grandpapa misses his brother so I said he should go.”

Bear smiled down at her. “Well, I think ‘tis a fine idea. I miss Stephen too.”

“So, are you going?” she asked, glancing back and forth between them.

“Can ye keep a secret?” Bear asked.

Margaret nodded and pinched her lips shut.

“Aye,” they both answered at once.

To the raucous sounds of laughter and camaraderie, Rory was grinning as he followed Little John and Alexander into the house through the front door. Alexander was walking a bit gingerly but refused to admit that he was saddle sore. They'd put him through a workout today because testing a tenderfoot was what young men did. But they'd discovered something about their cousin. What Alexander lacked in being a skilled rider, he made up for in pride. Despite practicing on a spirited horse, Alexander had carried out Little John's instructions for the last couple of hours with determination and admirable exactness.

Riding well requires coordination, balance, and, most of all, practice to get the best out of a horse and skill out of a rider. The only thing his cousin needed was more time in the saddle and a better horse. The mount Alexander rode here might be good as a broodmare, but she was not fit for a young man. Rory decided he would talk to Father about providing Alexander with a more worthy horse. He had one in mind that would be perfect for him.

Margaret ran to Rory and he snatched her up and twirled her around and around above his head. Her squeals of delight filled the room and made them all laugh. He loved his little rambunctious niece. "What have you been up to?" he asked her. "Have you been good to your Grandpapa and Granduncle?"

Margaret nodded vigorously. "I have, Uncle Rory. I've been talking to them 'bout something important, but it's a secret."

Rory's father and Uncle Bear exchanged amused glances.

Even though they were not related by blood because Bear was adopted by Rory's grandparents, Bear had always been his favorite uncle. His dark red hair and thick beard were now grizzled with white in a few spots, and there were deep creases on both sides of his green eyes, yet somehow he seemed ageless. Perhaps it was the Scottish lilt in his booming, deep voice, or his bright, intelligent eyes that made him appear so, but mostly he thought it might be that Bear was just young at heart. A large and powerful man, he was still vigorous, almost sprightly.

Bear's strength seemed to grow as he aged. But it was a different kind of strength. A strength that stemmed from experience and wisdom. And know-how. Lately, Rory could see little hints that his uncle was beginning to age. Just like his own father was.

Allison must have heard them enter because she pushed through the swinging door by the kitchen, came over, kissed Little John, and said, "I hope you're all hungry. Greta has prepared a feast to honor Uncle Bear and Alexander."

Little John inhaled deeply. "It smells wonderful. Is it ready now?"

"No, you have time to wash up and have a nice long drink with Father and Bear," Allison said. "If you need me, just holler. I'll be in the kitchen."

Ever since Mother left for Boston, Rory's sister-in-law had assumed a more active role in the household, doing many of the things normally done by his mother. The added responsibility came easily to Allison since she and Little John had run her Virginia plantation together six months out of every year for the first five years of their marriage. But when leaving her grandparents and Rory behind became too difficult for little Margaret, they decided to sell the plantation and reside at Cumberland Falls year-round. Their decision pleased Rory because he hated hearing Margaret cry when it was time for their departure, and he had always missed his brother and Allison.

He'd even missed seeing the two of them together—so much in love. Someday he hoped to find the same kind of woman. One that was devoted to her family, yet strong, with a keen mind, and a big heart. But living in the middle of nowhere made it difficult for him to meet young women. Rory knew she was out there somewhere, though. He just had to find her.

Rory, Little John, and Alexander washed their hands and faces, dusted off, and then returned to the front parlor where Father and Uncle Bear waited for them.

Rory scooped Margaret up and carried her.

Lowering himself gently, Alexander took a seat near his father.

Little John pulled a sturdy stool up next to Father and took a seat.

"There's a comfy pillow there if you need to cushion your behind," Rory said teasingly as he pointed to the pillow.

Alexander shook his head and tried to appear perfectly at ease. "I'm fine."

As Rory leaned down to deposit Margaret in her father's lap, Little John grinned up at him and whispered. "Go easy or you'll hurt more than the lad's behind."

Rory grinned and then leaned against the mantel. "So what's this about a secret?"

Father and Bear both started speaking at once and then Bear, ever the gentleman, motioned for Father to go ahead.

"Boys, this may come as a bit of a shock," Father said.

"Nothin' you two could do would shock me," Little John quipped.

"This may," Uncle Bear said as he raised his bushy eyebrows.

"Can I tell them?" Margaret asked. "It was my idea after all."

"Aye, ye tell them," Bear said.

Father nodded. "Yes. You tell them Squirrel." He looked almost relieved that Margaret would tell them.

"They're going to Texas! To see Granduncle Stephen!" Margaret exclaimed. "Isn't that exciting?"

“What!” Rory said.

“You must be joking,” Little John said. “I stand corrected. I am definitely shocked.”

“Texas is eight-hundred miles from here and in a state of turmoil,” Rory said with disbelief.

“I think it’s a grand idea!” Alexander said. “And I want to go too!”

Both Rory and Little John glowered at their cousin.

“No, it’s too dangerous for them,” Rory barked at Alexander before he turned back to his father. “You’re too old for a journey like that.”

Father stood and faced him eye to eye. “I’ve watched you grow up and you’ve watched me grow old. It’s time for me to stop watching and start doing before I can no longer do anything but sit on that porch out there.” He had raised his voice with obvious deep feelings. “When the time comes that I can no longer ride off on an adventure, I’ll relinquish my saddle for a rocker and whittle wood the rest of my life. But I’m not there yet!”

After his father’s uncharacteristic display of emotion, Rory stared at him in stunned silence.

Bear rose as well and so did the fire of his Scots soul. “And neither am I. The Captain and I have fought many a battle side by side. And we’ll fight again if ‘tis necessary,” he said, gesturing with a fist and moving to stand beside Sam. “It is our life to live. And we both want to see our youngest brother. It may take us a few extra days to get there. But rest assured, we *will* get there.”

Everyone remained quiet for a long, uneasy moment.

Rory exhaled and broke the uncomfortable silence that had descended on them. “So, let me understand this. Mother and Artis leave for an extended trip and you both decide to ride off into the wilderness to face unknown dangers while they’re gone.”

Father nodded. “That’s about right. It’s the perfect time to go. Instead of sitting here missing Catherine, I’ll be off having fun with Bear and seeing the freshest part of the country.”

"It's not a part of our country yet," Alexander pointed out.

"No, but from what I've read and heard, it soon will be," Father said. "Americans already outnumber the Mexicans four to one. And it is too far from Mexico City for their government to effectively control. The settlers there already look upon it as part of the United States."

"Exactly!" Rory said. "From Stephen's letters, Texas appears to be heading for a revolution. Do you want to be caught up in a war?"

"If Stephen and his family need us, then yes. And I'd be honored to give Texians a helping hand on the high road to freedom. If there is anything in this world worth fighting for besides your family, it is freedom. I've fought for freedom before and I don't mind doing it again," Father told them in a tone that reflected the seasoned soldier in him.

"Aye, and if there is anythin' worth *dyin'* for 'tis freedom," Bear said. "I'd rather die doin' somethin' than doin' nothin'."

Father's nodded his agreement with a clenched jaw. "It is a far sadder thing for a man of courage to die an idle man than to die an honorable death."

Rory started to pace. "How do you think Mother will react to your running off to Texas?"

Father put his glass down. "She'll understand because she understands me."

Rory wasn't so sure. The idea still greatly rankled him. "This is a bad plan."

"Sometimes bad ideas turn out to be the best ideas," Father said.

"Or a damn good adventure," Bear said.

"Look, Son, I can't stop time," Father said, "but I can make the most of it."

"Aye," Bear said. "As the proverbial phrase says, time and tide waits for na man."

"Even you two," Alexander said, glancing at both his father and

uncle.

Rory's brows drew together as he considered that abstruse statement. He faced Alexander. "Are you saying our fathers should use the time they have left taking a dangerous journey?"

"No. I only meant that we all only have the time we use. I would love to use the next few months of my life on an adventure with two of the bravest and strongest men to ever live. They're both practically legends. If you're not excited about that idea, then stay here."

Alexander's emphatic tone surprised Little John. It also surprised him that he agreed with Alexander. It would be a great way to spend the summer months—for the two of them, not their fathers.

"Father, I understand that you both miss Stephen," Little John said.

"And our nephews," Uncle Bear added.

"But you'll miss Margaret and she'll miss you," Little John persisted. "And I'll miss you."

"It was my idea," Margaret said with a good deal of pride. "We'll be here when Grandpapa gets back. And Granduncle Bear will take good care of him."

Surprised, Little John smiled at her. Then his expression turned far more serious. "I'm sure you could both take good care of each other. But you have always preached to us that when facing potential dangers there is safety in numbers. If you make this trip..."

"They're not making it!" Rory barked.

A snort broke out of Bear. "Aye, we're makin' it," he countered firmly and crossed his huge arms over his broad chest.

Father took a step toward him. "Rory, what are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of losing you!" he shouted as both fear and anger knotted inside of him. He realized his heart had always been fearful of losing Father. The man was not only a hero among many in Kentucky, but he was also *his* hero. And now that he was getting

older, maybe there wasn't going to be a lot of time left with him. He wanted Father there when he married. When he had his first child.

"I am afraid of losing you too," Little John said with a slight catch to his voice. "So if you insist on making this trip, then both Rory and Alexander need to go with you. With the help of the hands, I can manage things here. Rory has never had a chance to see the country and neither has Alexander. Their help could prove to be invaluable to you. It's the only way I will feel comfortable letting you go."

Rory was about to object to Little John giving in to the outrageous plan, but Bear spoke up first.

"Aye, it would be good for Alexander to experience a journey like that." He smiled warmly at his son. "Ye've spent too many hours inside four walls, helpin' me at the inn. You need to put some more muscle on yer bones and callouses on yer hands. Ye need to live life a little more to put courage in your heart."

"I've already started," Alexander said with a glance down at the spots on his palms rubbed raw from gripping the saddle so often trying not to fall off the galloping horse.

Rory frowned. No doubt there were also a few more raw spots on Alexander's body. His cousin was too green and too faint-hearted to be of much help on a difficult journey. He was better suited to balancing accounting entries in an office. To holding a quill rather than a rifle.

Rory shook his head and went to the whiskey decanter. He had to think of a way to put a damper on this preposterous idea. He poured three drinks and handed one to Little John and then Alexander.

Alexander took a sip and gagged a bit on the strong beverage. "Good whiskey!"

"Rory, pour yer father and me a wee bit more whiskey too," Uncle Bear told him.

Rory poured a finger width's worth into Bear's glass.

“Nay lad, a wee bit is two fingers worth,” Bear said with amusement in the eyes that met his. “Did yer father na teach ye anythin’? And a proper drink is four fingers worth. If ye’re to make this trip with us, ye will have to learn essential rules like that.”

“No amount of good whiskey is going to make this idea go down any easier,” Rory said with a scowl at his uncle. “I still don’t think this is a good idea. In fact, it’s a very bad idea.”

“Why?” Father and Bear both demanded at once.

“If I may be completely honest, because you’re both getting older,” Rory said.

“Tis exactly why we *must* do this, lad,” Bear vowed.

With that resolute declaration, Rory finally understood why this was so important to them. The two recognized their own mortality and they saw this as a chance to challenge time. They had always been warriors, and they would fight their own aging with the same fierceness and courage they’d always shown.

The four of them would be going to Texas.

“Do what?” Allison asked as she carried a platter full of steaming vegetables and placed it on the big dining table. The table was already set for seven people.

Greta followed her out of the kitchen with a heaping bowl of potatoes and a pitcher of gravy. “Take your zeats, gentlemen. I’ll pe out in chust ein zecond vith zee meat,” she said in her still heavy German accent.

Allison glanced around at all of them waiting for an answer to her question. “Do what?” she repeated.

When no one said anything, Margaret blurted out, “Grandpapa and Granduncle Bear are going off to have an adventure.”

“Adventure?” Allison asked.

“So they can live life,” Margaret said as though it were obvious.

Rory hoped that his niece was right and that these two precious men they all respected and loved so much weren’t going off to lose their lives.

That would kill all of them.

Jessica woke early, as she nearly always did, just as soon as the sun's rays poured through the lace curtains framing the window of her bedroom. Since she and her father moved to Nacogdoches four years ago, little by little, she made the room cozy with a good carpet, wardrobe, a toiletries table, a comfy chair, a desk that also held her books, washstand, chest of drawers, and a comfortable bed.

Although content with her bedroom above the store, someday, she wanted to live in a regular home with a flower garden and lots of windows. Windows didn't just let in the light. They were portholes into the outside world—a world of seasons, weather, wildlife, and even her dreams when she stared off into the distance.

Her dreams mostly revolved around wanting a real home and a family. A big family. As an only child with no other family besides her father, she sometimes felt almost alone in the world. What would it be like to have a mother? Several brothers and sisters? Cousins? And grandparents? And aunts and uncles? She had none of those.

They were holes in her life that would never be filled.

But someday, she might know the love of a husband. What would it be like to be loved by a man who loved you? She sensed that the answer to that question would fill the deepest of those hollow holes.

After making herself tea and eating a bit of buttered bread in

the kitchen, she brushed her long hair quickly and tied it at the nape of her neck with a blue ribbon. She intended to go down and see if Pa needed her help. Her father would have already been up for at least an hour and would be hard at work downstairs by now. A freight wagon had arrived the day before heavily loaded with a large order of goods from New Orleans. Her father purchased the store's merchandise from salesmen called drummers, who represented large wholesale houses and manufacturers located in larger cities and seaside ports.

Since the late spring day promised to be warm, she dressed in one of her cool work gowns, a sprigged muslin day dress embroidered with little leaves and tiny blue flowers. The puffed short sleeves were edged in ruffles of muslin with a similar broad band on the hem.

Although Harrison's two store clerks would help Father unload the wagon, she wanted to get the new items properly displayed in the store today because tomorrow she intended to spend most of the day with her friend, Rebecca.

Jessica believed a pleasing display of Harrison's goods helped the customers and increased sales. She also helped by keeping everything organized in the crowded store—grouping things by use on shelving along every wall. The floor was also crammed with boxes, barrels, and tables holding goods. All the food items were grouped together and included coffee beans, spices, baking powder, oatmeal, flour, sugar, tropical fruit, hard candy, eggs, butter, fruit, vegetables, honey, molasses, crackers, cheese, syrup, and dried beans.

All the sewing items—bolts of cloth, pins, needles, thread, ribbon, silk, and buttons—were kept in one place. And all the ready-made clothing such as undergarments, suspenders, workwear trousers and shirts, hats, and shoes were organized by size and color. And her artful display of household utensils such as pots and pans and decorations such as oil lamps, clocks, vases, and lace tablecloths, made those items sell well. The front counter held a

balance scale for weighing merchandise and a display case for small and valuable items.

The only thing they didn't sell were rifles, pistols, ammunition, and black powder. Her grandparents had been Quakers, and although her father didn't practice the religion, he still avoided weapons and violence. He was a peaceful man with a slow temper. She doubted that he had ever even fired a pistol.

The store's pleasing aroma grew stronger as Jessica descended the inside staircase built behind the front counter. The most pungent scent came from cigars and tobacco, but she could also smell cinnamon and nutmeg, two of her favorite scents.

She frowned as she heard her father nearly shouting close to the freight wagon parked at the back of the store. What was going on? It wasn't like Pa to raise his voice at anyone. As soon as she saw who he was speaking with, though, she understood and she listened for a few moments.

Donny was trying to persuade her father to encourage their courtship. "You do know who my father is, don't you?"

"I don't care who your father is. If Jessica isn't interested in your courting her, then I'm not going to interfere. Is this in any way unclear to you young man?" Father said.

"It is clear, Sir. Nevertheless, you must reconsider, for Jessica's sake," Donny protested. A tall man, he looked down his long nose at her shorter father.

"Don't presume to tell me what I *must* do," Pa told him. When he used that tone, he was nearing the end of his patience.

Clearly frustrated, Donny exhaled loudly. "Mr. Harrison, this is important to me, and it could be of great consequence to your daughter. If I find that we are compatible, I would make a fine husband for Jessica. I'm considered handsome. I have some savings. And I plan to follow in my father's footsteps. Surely you know what an important man he is in Nacogdoches and Texas. And a wife as beautiful as Jessica would help me to gain favor with the citizens of our town."

Jessica had heard enough. She wasn't going to be used by Donny to further his future. She strode over to them and placed her hands on her hips.

"Good morning, Miss Harrison," Donny greeted with a cheerful voice and a broad smile.

What was he doing? She had already made it clear that they were not compatible and that she wasn't ready to be courted by him. "Mr. Farley, why are you here? I made my thoughts regarding a courtship perfectly clear last night at dinner. My father is a busy man and you are taking up his time needlessly. Unless you are going to help unload that freight wagon, I must ask you to leave."

Donny glanced over at the still heavily loaded wagon and then down at his stylish suit of clothes. "I'm hardly dressed for menial work. Why don't you join me in a walk instead? It's a beautiful morning."

"I have a great deal of work to do here," Jessica said. "And I have no interest in walking with you."

"Please leave, Mr. Farley," Pa said. "And I would ask you to abandon your pursuit of my daughter. Even if she were interested in your courting her, I'm not!"

The forcefulness in her father's voice surprised but pleased Jessica. She'd always loved him, but today she was also proud of him for standing up for her.

"Well! I strongly suggest you *both* think again. I will give you some time to reconsider. If I'm not mistaken, your loan at the bank is coming due soon," he said with a knowing look at her father. "Good day, Mr. Harrison, Miss Harrison." Donny spun on his polished heels, and with long strides, swiftly strode toward the store's front doors.

"That is by far the most pig-headed man I've ever met," Father said as they both watched with relief as Donny left the store. "He just would not give up. And clearly, he thinks he can hold the loan over my head to gain my consent for his courtship."

Jessica frowned. "Can he?"

“No, we’ve done well lately. Don’t worry, I’m certain I’ll have the money to make my payment. And then some.”

Jessica hoped so because they had put their building up as collateral for the store’s inventory. If they couldn’t make the payment, they would lose everything and be broke and homeless.

“I can’t believe he would try to use that as leverage to get you to consent,” she said.

“I can. He’s used to getting his way. And he expects people to pander to him because of his father’s position at the bank,” Pa said.

“He’s a pompous, willful, spoiled brat,” Jessica said with disgust. “I bet he’s never done a day’s worth of hard work in his life. I could never love a man like that.”

“And never settle for someone like that, Jessica. You deserve to have love returned to you at its richest. Love that is deep, strong, and undeniable. Believe me, it’s worth waiting for. Even if it’s yours for only a short while.”

Jessica saw a hint of the sadness that still held a place in his heart for the love he’d lost when her mother died a year after her birth. She hugged him and said, “Speaking of work, I must get back to work myself.” She tied on an apron. “I will spend the day getting all the new items properly displayed.”

Pa nodded. “As always, I’m grateful for your help, Jessica. What would I do without you?”

“What would *I* do without you?” she asked with a playful wink at him.

He gave her shoulders a warm hug. With that, her father started checking each crate against his order to be sure he received what he ordered.

The clerks had stacked everything on the store’s loading dock, and as they brought the crates inside, Jessica set to work as well. “Please put that crate by the front window,” she told one of the two clerks. “And that one goes by the sewing goods on the right wall,” she instructed the other.

As she unpacked item after item and added them to Harrison’s

inventory, she considered Donny and his unwanted attentions. Had she done anything to encourage him—to give him the wrong impression and make him think he had a claim on her? She didn't think she had. So, why was he being so persistent? Perhaps he was just infatuated. But he didn't act besotted or smitten. He acted as though his attentions were just logical or the sensible thing to do. For *him*. He was absolutely self-centered and sought marriage for the wrong reasons.

Even though she'd never been in love, she knew love wasn't based on practicality or reason. She believed it would be based purely on emotions and sentiments. And if very fortunate, on passion.

Donny had a lot to learn about love and courtship. And she wasn't interested in being the one to teach him. Not that she possessed a great deal of knowledge on the subject, but she did read a lot of romantic novels. And she often observed her friends Rebecca and Steve, and his older brother, Samuel, and his wife Louisa. They were all love-struck. You could tell by the way the two couples looked at each other. There was an almost magical glow between them as they embraced with their eyes. At other times, she caught a look of longing, desire, and intrigue all captured in one glance. And sometimes, when Steve gazed at Rebecca, she could tell that everything and everyone else was invisible to him except for his new wife. That was quite beautiful to see.

Most likely Donny would just give up and pursue one of the other unmarried women in town, although they were few and far between. The town held about six hundred men but only one hundred women. And many of those women were from poverty-stricken farm families who could ill afford to lose the help of a healthy daughter in their corn and cotton fields.

The rest of the day, Jessica continued to work on her displays in between assisting shoppers. When she finally finished, she glanced around, pleased with her accomplishments. Next, she

swept the store of the dirt tracked in by customers. Then she swept the front porch, observing the many men on horses that passed by. Some of them would politely tip their hat at her.

When she went back inside, she took a final look outside through the store's front window. Would she one day look out and see a man she wanted to court her? A man who would awaken her slumbering heart?

God help him, Rory thought, as they all sat down to dinner. It looked like he would be going to Texas with one green, barely twenty-year-old and two seasoned old men. Although he hadn't yet told them that he would go, he knew he had to.

"Father, can I say the blessing?" Margaret asked Little John.

"Yes, sweetie. Thank you for volunteering."

After they all bowed their heads, Margaret said, "God bless this food. God bless our home. God bless all who live here. Be with Grandmama and Grandauntie on their trip. And be sure that Uncle Rory and Alexander will see Grandpapa and Granduncle safely through to Texas. Amen."

Well, if he hadn't made up his mind before, that would have cinched it. Reluctantly, because he still thought it a bad idea, he said, "I'll go, on one condition." Rory glanced between his father and Uncle Bear.

"What's that?" Father asked.

"That you promise to come back home regardless of what is happening in Texas. No matter how tempting it may be to stay longer to fight for freedom or some other reason, we will all leave in time to be home well before Christmas."

"We can try," Father said. "But there are no guarantees on journeys like this."

"I don't want Mother coming back and finding both of us gone," Rory told him. "I want your promise."

Allison handed him a platter of corn on the cob. He took only

one. He'd lost his appetite earlier.

Rory cast a penetrating look at his father and then at his uncle. "This is our home, not Texas. It was Uncle Stephen's choice to move off that far. Alexander and I were just boys when he left, and we haven't seen him in more than a decade. We barely know him. So I can't say that I'm thrilled about making an eight-hundred-mile journey to see him."

"It's na just to see Stephen," Bear said. "That is just the reward at the end of the effort. It's about the gettin' there."

"And getting back," Rory persisted.

His uncle frowned. "Yer missing the point, lad."

"It's about learning your rightful place in the world," Father said. He set his fork down. "Let me tell you a bit about our brother Stephen. Perhaps then you will want to get to know him better. Many years ago, in 1797, Stephen gathered all of his brothers in one room. Little John was only about five at the time, and his father, John, was a recent widower."

That reminded Rory of something he rarely acknowledged. Little John was actually his cousin, not his brother. Little John's father, Sam's brother, died soon after all of them arrived in Kentucky, leaving his son an orphan. At once, Father and Mother had adopted him. Yet, even knowing this, Rory would always consider Little John his brother. He glanced over at Little John, and when their eyes connected, he knew Little John felt the same way.

Father cleared his throat and continued. "We'd all been struggling to make a decent living, but none more so than Stephen. He had four young girls and nothing but a rocky plot of land. He toiled sunup to sundown until his hands were raw, trying to clear his land of rocks. Then he read Daniel Boone's book, *Adventures*, describing the paradise that was Kentucky. But Stephen was fearful that the trip would be dangerous and that some of us might die on that thousand-mile journey."

"What happened then?" Alexander asked.

“Believe it or not, it was Little John who helped us to decide. I’ll never forget what he said.”

“I was only around five. What could I have said to affect such an important decision,” Little John asked.

“You said that we can die anywhere, just as your mother already had,” Father said.

“And ‘twas Stephen and his wife Jane who suffered the most on our journey,” Bear said with remembered sadness clouding his face. “They lost two wee daughters to fever. I dug their graves myself.”

Margaret, who sat on Bear’s other side, placed her little hand on his big arm in a comforting gesture.

“We faced many challenges—Indians, wolves, floods, to name but a few. But Stephen never gave up his dream of finding the land he needed for his family,” Father said. “And his other two daughters, your cousins, Martha and Polly, and their families are now reaping the benefits of that very same land, just north of here. Along with their husbands, they are among the wealthiest cattle raisers in the state. And now, we have one of the finest horse farms in all Kentucky if not the country. All because of Stephen’s dream.”

“Uncle Stephen sounds like quite a man,” Alexander said.

Rory had to agree. Uncle Stephen sounded like a man he could respect.

“I loved Colonel Boone’s *Adventures* myself,” Alexander added.

Father continued, “When Stephen realized that the land he’d been able to acquire here in Kentucky wouldn’t be enough to support the families of all six of his children, he left his thriving cattle operation to his daughters. Ever the adventurer, he took his four sons to claim the free land in the Louisiana Purchase. I’ve read his letters to you, so you know it hasn’t been easy for them.”

Bear nodded his hairy jaw. “They’ve had to fight Comanches, deal with horse thieves, build homes from nothin’, deal with changin’ boundaries and governments, and lately they lost their homes to a flood. But there’s na give up in that man.”

“Nor in me,” Father said, eyeing Rory pointedly. “Bear and I are going to Texas, with or without you two.”

Rory could see a fire burning in his father’s belly again. A fire that had been dormant for some time. If it took a trip like this to light his father’s soul up again, then it must be the right thing to do. “When do we leave?”

The Mississippi River, riding high on spring rains according to a recent traveling preacher, would pose a challenging barrier between them and Texas. Rivers always proved to be an unfailing source of trouble, and Rory wondered how Father intended to get across the mightiest of all rivers.

After the dinner was cleared away, Father rolled out a rare copy of John Thomson’s coast to coast map of the United States, published four years ago in Edinburgh in 1820. As a former mapmaker himself, his father had ordered the map as soon as it became available because it included information from the expeditions of Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike and John Long’s explorations to the Rocky Mountains, Alexander von Humboldt, Alexander MacKenzie, and other explorers.

“To get to Nacogdoches in Texas, we have two choices,” Father said. “One option is to travel down the Mississippi on flatboats with the Kaintucks. Then we would cross Louisiana into Texas.”

Midwestern farmers, called Kaintucks, used flatboats to float their crops or livestock down the Ohio-Mississippi River to markets in Natchez or New Orleans. Flatboats were huge barge-like vessels constructed to hold cargo, wagons, horses, and other equipment. They were steered by huge sweeps, often as long as the boats themselves.

“Once downriver, flatboats are of little use because they can’t travel against the southbound current. It’s too strong. So farmers sell them to be dismantled for lumber and then walk home by way

of the Natchez Trace a roadway between Natchez and Nashville,” Father explained.

“If we choose the Mississippi route, is that how we’d get back?” Alexander asked.

Father pointed to a road on the map. “The Natchez Trace is the most direct route back with the least Indian troubles. And there are inns, known as stands, along the Trace that serve food and provide lodging to travelers.”

“How long would we be on the Natchez Trace getting home?” Rory asked.

“We could expect to cover it in about twenty-five days,” Father said. “The trail was created and used by Indians for centuries and later by explorers, traders, and now by Kaintucks. That’s why the journey may become dangerous because the pockets of those farmers returning home on foot are loaded with cash money. Along the trail, they are frequently preyed upon by gangs of robbers.”

“Isn’t there another way home without risking attacks by gangs of robbers on the Trace?” Alexander asked.

Father nodded. “Robbers are always a risk no matter your route, but another option is to travel over land both ways.”

“Och,” Bear said. “Let’s do that. I’m na a very good swimmer.”

Father chuckled. “I know. You do tend to sink.”

“Aye,” Bear agreed. “I’d much rather only cut across the Mississippi than float down it for hundreds of miles.”

“Over land may be the best route anyway. It will take longer, but at least if we’re caught in a terrible storm, we won’t be on a boat on a raging river,” Father said. “But going that way, we will still have to cross three rivers and many streams.”

“Father, show us the land route,” Rory said. Now that he had accepted that this journey was going to happen, anticipation was beginning to brew within his chest.

Father moved a candle closer and leaned over the map. “We would head southwest to Bowling Green, then south through Tennessee to Nashville and then Memphis. We’ll want to cross the

Mississippi there. Our next stop will be in Arkansas at Little Rock, where we will have to cross the Arkansas River at Little Rock Ford. From there it will be another three hundred miles south to Nacogdoches.”

“Will we have to swim the Sabine River?” Rory asked, pointing to the river that divided Louisiana from Mexican Texas.

“Stephen wrote that they entered Texas at Gaines’ Ferry on the Old San Antonio Road, crossing the Sabine River east of the Milam settlement,” Father told him.

“Will you send a letter to Uncle Stephen letting him know we’re coming?” Alexander asked.

“Not much point. We would get there about the same time the letter arrived,” Father said.

Alexander began to pace. “We’ll need to send word of our plans to Uncle William. He can oversee the inn.”

“In the morning, I’ll have one of our hands carry a letter to him,” Father told him. “He can also carry our letters to Catherine and Artis. He can post them there in Boonesborough.”

Bear grimaced. “Och, I do na look forward to penin’ that missive. I’m sure I’ll be able to hear her protests from here.”

They all chuckled, knowing Bear was not exaggerating much.

Anxious to begin her visit with Rebecca, Jessica crossed the busy main street, avoiding riders and wagons going in both directions, and the many piles of fresh horse droppings.

She headed toward the Tyler home, located about a mile outside of town next to the Tyler's sugar mill. At least the road wasn't muddy. In the spring, the dreadfully mucky roads made the entire town look like a pigsty at times, and everyone and everything were always mud-spattered. Although the road was still appallingly uneven and bumpy, the sun had already made it harden again. Before long, the Texas sun would dry everything out, and the problem would be dust. Now, though, the temperature was pleasant, and a slight breeze teased the colorful medley of fragrant wildflowers growing alongside the road. Butterflies danced in the air among the blossoms.

Jessica soon sensed someone behind her and turned to look but didn't spot anyone following her. Townspeople were bustling everywhere, coming and going into shops, and standing about talking in small groups. No one was paying any attention to her, so she proceeded away from town along the path that led east.

The pleasant, fresh air and sunshine felt good on her face after all the time spent indoors at the store yesterday. She walked briskly, eager to see Rebecca and hear all about the honeymoon trip. Yet her instincts continued to make her shoulders tense. Glancing behind her again, Rebecca spotted the source of her unease.

Donny trailed behind her.

She stopped and hollered toward him, "What are you doing?"

"Looking out for my future bride," he said, hurrying to catch up to her.

"Bride?" she asked incredulous. "Surely you jest, Mr. Farley." She hiked up her skirt a bit to clear a patch of weeds and resumed her walk.

"Never. Not about you," he said as he drew up next to her. "When I saw you cross the street, I decided you needed an escort. Are you going to Rebecca's?"

She ignored his question. Where she was going was none of his business. "I don't need an escort. What do I have to say to get through to you? I'm not interested in your courtship! Nor will I ever be interested."

"Jessica, I won't give up."

She stopped and faced him. "Why?" she demanded. "You don't love me."

"That's true, nonetheless I know I will grow to love you," he said. His eyes lowered to her breasts for an instant. "And you will grow to love me someday too. For now, I'm content to know that I am courting and later marrying the most beautiful woman in all of Nacogdoches."

"Once again, I must ask you to direct your attentions elsewhere, Sir."

"No, I only want to court you."

"My father told you that you do not have his approval to court me!" She turned away and marched on toward Rebecca's home. "You will have to give up this nonsensical pursuit of me. I will not do anything against my father's wishes. I love him too much."

"Don't worry, I'll persuade your father, you'll see."

"No, you won't. My father will also not go against my wishes."

"But it's time you married. You must be at least twenty. Most women your age are married by now. You don't want to end up a spinster."

“I’m only nineteen!” Affronted by his outlandish remark, she scurried on, her cheeks burning with indignation.

Donny continued on as well, sticking right by her side. He even reached out to take her arm.

Jessica rarely got angry at anyone. But she was truly furious now. Jerking her arm away, she said, “Stop stalking me! Go away!”

“I’m just going to pay a little visit to Rebecca too. As the daughter of a wealthy man, she’ll recognize the worth of my courtship. She will see the value of your alliance with a man of standing and prominence in our community. Perhaps she can talk some sense into you—one woman to another.”

“It’s you who needs sense. You have a decided lack of it. There’s something you should understand, Donny. As long as my father is living, I must remain with him. I can’t move out of his household. He would be lonely without me, and I have duties at the store. Duties that are important to the success of our store. He needs me. I’m the only family he has.”

They spent the rest of the way to the Tyler home in brooding silence.

Mr. Tyler, Rebecca’s father, was a prosperous sugarcane planter who planted large acreages. Their two-story wood-frame house with its smokehouse, blacksmith shop, horse paddocks, as well as gardens and a sugarcane mill, was one of the finest in Nacogdoches. Rebecca and Steve were living upstairs until their own home was finished.

As Jessica approached the house, the smell of sugarcane was in the air, but her mood was anything but sweet. She raced up the steps to the front door and pounded loudly.

“I’m coming,” she heard Rebecca call.

The door opened as Donny stepped up and stood directly behind her, far too close. His nearness made her skin crawl.

“Hello, Jessica. I didn’t know you were bringing Mr. Farley,” Rebecca said.

“I didn’t!” Jessica said. “He invited himself.” She slipped in

beside Rebecca and left Donny standing on the porch.

Rebecca seemed to sense Jessica's discomfort. Her beautiful face frowned as she asked, "What brings you here, Mr. Farley?"

"Since you are Jessica's best friend, I was hoping I might speak with you."

Jessica immediately regretted telling Donny, the other night at dinner, how close she and Rebecca were. What else had she shared that she would come to regret?

"About what, Sir?" Rebecca asked.

"A personal matter. Please, may we speak inside?" Donny asked. "It is of the utmost importance." Hat in hand, he was trying to appear gentlemanly.

A wolf in sheep's clothing.

Rebecca's eyes sought Jessica's, and she shook her head.

"My husband is working cattle with his brother Samuel at the present," Rebecca said. "Perhaps you could come back later this evening when he is here."

"But it is you I need to speak with. It's about Jessica."

Rebecca turned and faced Jessica again with a questioning look on her face.

Jessica shook her head, and said in a hushed voice, "Tell him to go away."

Rebecca lifted her chin as she said, "Today is not a good time. Goodday, Sir."

As her friend swiftly closed the front door and then locked it, Jessica said, "Thank goodness you did not let him in."

"Jessica, I will not give up on you!" Donny shouted through the door. His voice held anger and something else. Something strange. "You *will* let me court you. You'll come to realize I'm the most eligible man in Nacogdoches. And you're the most eligible young lady. We belong together. Rebecca, *please* make her understand!"

Now Jessica heard desperation in his voice.

"What is going on?" Rebecca asked, keeping her voice low and tugging Jessica away from the door.

Jessica shared what had transpired the night before last at their dinner and Donny's visit to the store yesterday. "The man just won't give up."

"Good heavens!" Rebecca said. "He must truly be smitten."

"I don't think so. I think he's pursuing me purely for personal gain. He's only made a clumsy attempt to be romantic at the restaurant by handing me one of the roses out of the vase on the table."

"He didn't!"

"He did. He says he needs a beautiful wife to further his business interests. He intends to follow in his father's footsteps."

"Well, you are beautiful, there's no doubt about that. But that's beside the point. Physical attraction is just one part of a relationship—there's also intellectual, spiritual, and of course, emotional attraction."

"Exactly. And a sense of humor. And loyalty. And strength of character. Those make a man attractive too. He has none of those qualities."

"Indeed." Rebecca frowned. "Are you worried about his attentions?"

"Perhaps I should be. He looks at me with something other than admiration. It's more like arrogant determination."

"I don't like the sound of that. What are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know," she said gloomily. "Father and I were both very firm with him. Perhaps your mother would have some suggestions."

"She's gone to visit her friend in San Augustine. Father took her this morning and will pick her up in a couple of days. He should be on his way back now."

"I'm sorry she's not here. She's such a wise woman."

"If Donny becomes any more of a problem, I'll have Steve and Samuel pay him a visit. That will put a stop to this."

"I'm sure that's not necessary. I don't want any trouble," Jessica

told her. “I just want him to leave me alone.”

Rebecca guided her toward the luxurious home’s dining room. “Well, we’ll figure something out over tea and my famous doughnuts. They should improve your mood.”

As the daughter of a sugarcane grower, Rebecca had always enjoyed baking sweets. And ever since Rebecca’s doughnut recipe was used to serve the guests at her wedding, everyone was talking about how good they were. Jessica was even trying to talk Rebecca into selling them at the store. But Rebecca had many other interests including artwork, reading, and her studies, and she didn’t have time to bake every week.

After they sat down at the large dining table, Jessica said, “First, tell me about your honeymoon. *All* of it!” The two young women chuckled and spent the rest of the morning enjoying each other’s company and several doughnuts each. Rebecca’s tales of the days she and Steve spent in New Orleans kept Jessica enthralled.

She forgot all about Donny.

Until she started for home.

Cumberland Falls to Glasgow and Bowling Green, Kentucky

Wearing a clean buckskin hunting shirt, brown leather breeches, and the fox skin cap with the tail hanging behind that he'd bought in Boonesborough, Alexander sat atop his new horse. The tall dappled gray gelding named Thunder was a generous gift from his Uncle Sam. At first, given his name and size, he'd been leery of the animal, but after Little John demonstrated how well trained he was, Alexander felt more comfortable.

Before he climbed onto Thunder's back for the first time, Little John gave Alexander a small package containing two big steel needles and thread made from hemp coated with beeswax. Then, as Rory looked on, he showed Alexander how to inspect the horse's tack and saddle.

"Use those to make any repairs you'll need. At least every few days, look for any loose or frayed stitching," Little John said, "or stretched and cracked leather, fractured buckles or rings, worn or sharp edges on bits, and any other damage or wear. You don't want to cause discomfort or injury to your mount. And, crucially important, if you don't spot these in advance, your saddle, bridle, or bit could come apart while you are riding, especially if you had to ride hard and fast. And some time on your trip, I'm guessing you will have to."

"Why?" Alexander and Rory both asked.

"Because you're riding west and with every mile, the wilderness

will grow wilder and even more unpredictable. It's far from tame, so prepare yourselves."

Alexander knew that Little John meant they should prepare mentally, but they had also prepared in other ways. Each of their saddlebags carried a full load of powder and ball and cleaned and oiled longrifles were sheathed on their saddles. Additionally, they carried essential food supplies like salt and coffee, but most of their food would come from hunting game. Since it was late spring, they didn't bring coats. By the time they would need them, they could buy them in Nacodogches or in Little Rock on the way back.

After everything was made ready, they all shook hands and bid Little John, Allison, and Margaret goodbye. Since the trip would be too great a distance for the dog, Little John held Snow by his collar and agreed to keep the dog penned or in the house for two weeks until he could no longer follow their scent. Margaret promised to pet him often and keep him company during the two weeks.

Alexander's father, loaded with weapons of all sorts, sat atop his bay gelding. Alexander had never seen Bear look quite so fierce—like a force of nature to be reckoned with. Perhaps because he wore a MacKay plaid sash of blues and greens across his chest that was pinned in place, close to his heart, with his clan badge. The badge bore the clan motto *Manu Forti*, with a fierce hand. The motto, a war cry used in the ancient Highlands, was still embedded deep in his father's heart. Da's black leather sporran hung from a chain down his front and now held their money.

Uncle Sam rode a splendid black stallion named Steel. His trusted longknife was sheathed on his left side and a pistol hung on his right. Last night Alexander had watched and learned how Sam worked a sharp edge on his deerhorn-handled blade. Just the sight of the mighty knife made shivers run down Alexander's spine. He'd grown up hearing frightening stories of how Sam had used the blade during his life. Dressed entirely in a set of butter-colored buckskins, his hair, which normally hung to his shoulders was tied back with leather at his neck. He wore new handmade moccasins

saying they were far quieter than boots while hunting game.

Rory rode an impressive buckskin gelding with a black mane and tail named Buck. Dressed all in black, his cousin wore a linen hunting shirt and leather breeches with his knee-high sturdy boots. His hair, also black, hung beneath his flat-brimmed felt hat. Rory's handsome face appeared somber, and his square jaw clenched with what looked like uncertainty.

Alexander wondered if his cousin was still opposed to this journey and was having second thoughts. As for him, no second thoughts marred his leaving. With a sudden burst of excitement, he knew this journey would help to make him the man he wanted to be. All he needed was the courage to see it through.

The time to leave had finally arrived, and the four of them waved to Little John, Allison, Margaret, and the farmhands who had gathered to see them off.

Surprisingly, Margaret didn't cry. The child seemed to understand how important the journey was to her grandfather. "Goodbye Grandpapa," she told him. "Goodbye, Granduncle Bear, Rory, and Alexander. Bring me back a present, please."

Grinning, Alexander's heart sped up as they turned their mounts toward the well-worn path that led to the road and started off.

After but a few steps of his horse, Uncle Sam stopped suddenly and rode back to Margaret. He reached down and heaved her up onto his horse and into his lap. He kissed her cheeks and head several times and enfolded her in his strong arms. Hugging his granddaughter affectionately, he said, "I'll bring you two presents." Then he lowered her into her father's waiting arms.

Shifting Margaret to one side, Little John reached up, shook his father's outstretched hand, and said, "God's speed." They all waved again, and Uncle Sam turned back toward the trail that led away from the horse farm.

When they rode off with the morning sun on their backs, Alexander's face felt flushed and his palms were damp. He realized

how significant the journey would be for him too. This would be a chance to prove himself to his father, his uncle, his cousin, and most importantly, to himself.

As Thunder took the first steps of a journey of many steps, Alexander could feel some unseen force that seemed to draw him westward. This was his destiny. And he sensed that it was Rory's destiny too.

To the creak of saddle leather and the clomping of their horses' hooves, Rory once again wondered why they were making this journey. It didn't make any sense. None at all. There must be a reason beyond Father and Bear wanting to have one last adventure. Or their wanting to see Uncle Stephen. What was their true purpose?

Were their fathers making this journey for their sons' sakes? Both Alexander and he needed to get out and see the world and experience life. That was true. But their fathers didn't need to come along for that.

He just hoped they could all make the journey and all return safely. And maybe something good would come from their trek to Texas.

Perhaps he would be granted what his heart wished for. Maybe he and Alexander would meet the women of their dreams somewhere along the way. He wasn't sure if Alexander also dreamt of finding a wife since he was still only twenty. But at twenty-four, Rory certainly did. Love, or more accurately, the lack of it seemed to occupy much of his thoughts lately.

He tried to imagine what a lover might be like. What would she look like? What would she enjoy doing? What were her dreams? What would she want from a husband? Could he be as good a husband as his father is to his mother? Or as Little John is to Allison?

But most of all, he wondered where she was right now.

“How far to Bowling Green?” Alexander asked him.

When they started off, Rory had told Alexander that with two stops to rest, on average, they could travel around thirty miles in a day and not overwork the horses. In keeping with that, Rory figured they should cover the one-hundred and fifty miles to Bowling Green in five days.

“I already told you,” Rory said. “About five days.”

As they rode, Rory could tell that Alexander and Thunder were getting to know one another, and with every mile, the trust between the two seemed to grow. Like every relationship, trust was central to faith in each other. The horse had a smooth gait and excellent endurance. Most importantly, the gelding was level headed and didn’t spook easily. On this long of a ride, Thunder would become more than Alexander’s horse. He would become a friend.

The first few days passed quickly as they rode through mile after mile of lush forests and soaring pine trees growing on rolling hills. The trees were so thick they often formed a canopy over the road. There seemed to be as many birds as trees, and they often heard the songs and trills of red cardinals, the indigo-colored bunting, and the yellow warbler.

Occasionally, a bit of water flowed through the scenery. They crossed numerous babbling creeks, some green and some the color of whiskey. A cascading waterfall they saw, though beautiful, wasn’t nearly as big as Cumberland Falls nearby his home. And they found two springs with cold, sweet water clear as crystal, where they stopped for a quick swim to cool off from the mugginess of the woods.

With every mile, Rory continued to imagine the woman that might await him at the end of their long journey. She was even more beautiful than the scenery he was enjoying. His visions soon became so vivid he began thinking of her as a real person.

The woman he would love.

Tomorrow they would reach Bowling Green, but as the sun set, they arrived in a settlement called Glasgow, which must have been named for the hometown of one of its founders.

Uncle Bear insisted on visiting the tavern called Kilts to fortify themselves, as he called it, before making camp. There he toasted several times to his beloved Scotland. With the town's large number of Scots inhabitants, Bear had plenty of encouragement for his toasts which always began with the Gaelic *Slàinte mhath*, pronounced slan-ge-var.

"What does *Slàinte mhath* mean?" Rory asked Alexander.

"It means good health," Alexander said.

"When God made Scotland," Bear told the group of local men who had joined them, "he gave it beautiful scenery, soaring mountains to climb, brave men, spirited women, and a fine whiskey to drink."

"Aye!" the men all called out.

"And he did the same for Kentucky!" Bear shouted.

"Aye! Aye!" the Kentucky Scots all boisterously agreed.

Father chuckled. "He's in his element. Enjoying the camaraderie of his fellow Scots."

"Aye," Alexander agreed. "But one more whiskey and Da will not be able to sit a horse tomorrow without leaning one way or the other."

"We need to get him out of here," Rory said. "He's too big to carry."

Father nodded and stepped up to Bear. "Time to go, brother. Let's get something to eat."

Fortunately, his uncle did not argue, probably because he was hungry. Rory had heard his uncle's stomach growl several times.

After a good beef dinner at the inn, where they all stuffed themselves, they made camp close to the western edge of town. They had agreed that they would only stay overnight in inns about

once every week. His father preferred to sleep under the stars anyway. Uncle Bear, who took a short nap every time they stopped, could sleep anywhere at a moment's notice. And Rory didn't mind sleeping on hard ground. He always fell asleep within minutes.

Alexander, however, seemed to find it difficult to fall asleep in the wild. The moon and tree branches cast unnerving shadows, and the forest seemed to come alive with eerie noises after dark. Bear explained that he was hearing the sounds of amorous foxes, rutting deer, screeching owls, hunting wolves and coyotes, night-calling insects, and other creatures echoing through the trees. Sam reassured them that the sounds were not Indians, and with their campfire, predators would stay well away.

Even so, Rory noticed that when it came time to sleep, Alexander stayed close to his father's bedroll.

Just as they were all drifting off to sleep, Alexander asked, "How much further to Bowling Green?"

"Go to sleep, lad," Uncle Bear growled.

The next evening, on the fifth day of their journey, they rode into Bowling Green. Various stores, a tavern, and modest homes lined the streets around the courthouse square, as well as a local newspaper office, doctor's office, a school for boys, and several churches. Stagecoach lines connected the thriving town to Louisville, Nashville, and Hopkinsville, while flatboats carried tobacco, hams, whiskey, and farm produce down to New Orleans.

"After sleeping on a bedroll for four nights," Alexander said, "I'm more than ready for a real bed. I've never ached in so many places in my life." But already, with the fresh air and time spent in the sunshine, Alexander appeared stronger and more alive than ever before.

They stabled their mounts at the livery and then sought out the Bowling Green Inn, a large, but simple building painted green in the center of town. An aging clerk checked them in, and they registered for two rooms with two beds each.

Rory glanced out the window, taking in the town while his father paid the man.

The clerk said, "You look as though you could all use a bath too. Shall I have a hot tub filled up in each of your rooms? It's just ten cents extra."

"Aye," Bear said at once. "I'm beginning to smell like a real Bear."

With a grin and wink from under his bushy gray brows, the clerk said, "I hadn't noticed."

Nashville

As they drew nigh to Nashville under a whisker-thin crescent moon, Rory heard in the distance the scraping of a fiddler's catgut. With the publication in Nashville of a popular hymnal called *Western Harmony*, the Tennessee settlement soon developed a reputation for good music. If the music lilting toward them was any indication, the reputation was well-deserved.

The lively tune seemed to come from the edge of town. They pulled up on their horses and heard a song being played in a topnotch style that seemed to be welcoming them. Rory recognized it as, *Hail Columbia*.

Soon, men were enthusiastically singing along with the fiddler, "Hail, Columbia, happy land! Hail, ye heroes, heav'n-born band."

It made Rory wonder whether they were, indeed, a heaven-born band. He was still worried about his father and Bear and their safety and stamina on this journey. A journey of this magnitude required fortitude from even young men. But so far, both his father and Uncle Bear were showing no signs of weakness. If anything, both he and Alexander were more often more exhausted at the end of each day.

Hearing music performed well was a real rarity and eager to hear more they hurried toward the tavern.

The music grew louder the closer they drew to the town and the tavern called The Villager. Before they finished tying up their

horses to the hitching rail, the musician struck up another tune in a lively manner.

Smiling broadly as they entered the place, Bear told them, “’Tis *Over the Water to Charlie* an old Scottish Jacobite song.”

To Rory’s surprise, as soon as they entered the tavern, Bear joined in the singing of the song in his booming voice. “Come, boat me ower, come, row me ower, come, boat me ower to Charlie; I’ll gi’e John Ross another bawbee, to ferry me ower to Charlie. We’ll over the water, and over the sea, We’ll over the water to Charlie; Come weel, come woe, we’ll gather and go, and live and die wi’ Charlie.”

When the song finished, Bear said, “Remind me to sing that song as we cross the Mississippi.”

“How close are we to the river?” Alexander asked Sam.

“About two hundred miles. We should cross within a week.”

Rory glanced at Bear, who seemed to shudder a bit.

“And then how far to Nacodocghes?” Alexander asked after they ordered four ales and food and then found a free table in the bustling tavern.

“Assuming no setbacks, about two weeks,” Father said.

A man stopped suddenly as he passed their table with two other men behind him whom Rory thought might be his sons. “I know that clan badge,” he said in a slurred voice, and pointed his unsteady finger to Bear’s chest. “’Tis of the MacKays.”

“Aye,” Uncle Bear said. “Be ye from Scotland?”

The man leaned closer and Rory noticed a boil on his prominent chin the size of a hazelnut.

“Aye, and I know yer bloody clan supported King George and opposed the Jacobites,” the man managed to say.

“’Twas a hundred years ago, man,” Bear said. “’Tis time we leave past disputes in Scotland.”

“Yer clan’s a disgrace to Scotland,” the man spat.

Rory’s eyes widened and Alexander groaned.

This was not going to end well.

Bear reared up and grabbed the man by the chest, lifting him about a foot off the ground. The fellow's sons tried to stop Bear but ceased when Rory and Alexander both stood, fists clenched.

Father remained seated and calmly took a sip of his ale.

"Ye know me not," Bear hissed. "But because ye've had a wee bit too much strong drink this eve, I'll let yer insult pass. Are these yer sons?"

The red-faced man nodded.

Bear tightened his grip as he snarled, "Teach them that a Scot is a Scot, na matter his clan. I wear my badge and tartan to honor my father and his father. But I am an American now. And an American is *all* of us who come here and are willin' to leave our pasts behind us and fight for and build our new country. Remember this, Sir. Americans are one clan, under God, na matter where our ancestors or we came from. The only thing that matters is what a man does *now* to honor himself and his country."

"Here, here!" dozens of nearby men shouted.

"Take yer father home," Bear told the two sons.

Memphis

The sun had just risen as Alexander caught his first glimpse of the countryside north of Memphis. He'd read about the town in the *Kentucky Gazette*. Founded five years ago by three prominent Tennesseans John Overton, James Winchester, and Andrew Jackson, they wisely built the town high above the Mississippi River on a flood-free location.

As they approached the Mississippi, Alexander could smell the river's churning waters filled with earth, rotting moss, and fish. The fields on both sides of the road were covered with that cheerful green grass that the heat of July and August would wither so easily. Bluffs covered with large oaks, American beech, hickory, and sweet gum rose up from the bottomlands. And closer to the

river's bank, on the bottomlands, they found mature bald cypress and the Tupelo swamp bordering the mighty Mississippi River.

From newspapers, Alexander had learned that Memphis was named after Egypt's ancient capital on the Nile River in North Africa. He didn't know how large the Nile was, but he doubted it could be any bigger than the Mississippi that stretched out before him. It appeared to be close to a mile across.

Though he'd grown up swimming with his brothers in the Kentucky River not far from their home, the sight of this river sent shivers through him. Although a marked improvement over the canoe, the flatboat ferry did not do away with the trials of river crossings. A large element of peril still remained, and travelers faced high tolls and high risks. Back in Boonesborough, and even on their journey here, they'd heard tales of several sad incidents where people drowned in the swift, deep, waters of the Mississippi, especially in winter when the water was shockingly cold.

Thankfully, the ferry was docked on this side of the Mississippi, and since it was so early, no others were waiting to cross.

Alexander noticed that the bottom of the vessel at both the bow and stern sloped upward, which he surmised would have the effect of reducing water resistance and allow the slender vessel to glide across the water with less effort.

Two poles of great length, perhaps over eighteen feet, and extra oars rested on each of the vessel's sides. And two stout men holding very large oars sat on barrels on each side. Alexander suspected they would row in the deepest part of the river, where reaching a firm bottom by poling was impossible. Only their brute strength would keep the boat on course to the opposite side.

The deck floated just a few inches above the waterline, and that had Alexander worried. He glanced at his father, whose creased forehead showed he was also bothered by the sight of the boat.

"Is this crossin' safe?" Bear asked the ferryman with narrowed eyes.

Alexander could hear an uneasiness in his father's voice that

echoed the concern in his own rapidly beating heart. If he didn't drown in the river, he was certain he would soon drown in a sea of his own anxieties. Wanting to appear as brave as Rory, he struggled to seem calmer than he was.

"My craft is always at the mercy of the current, but it is as safe as a river crossing can be," he said. The tall, muscular man had huge paws and arms that looked as hard as boulders.

"How long will it take to cross?" Alexander asked.

"An hour or more," the man said, scratching his shaggy beard. "Are you ready to go now?"

Ferryman were required to post their fares, and Alexander studied the man's barely legible sign with numerous misspelled words. The fees were one and two dollars for light and heavy wagons, twenty-five cents for one man and his horse, ten cents for a man on foot, six cents a head for cattle, and lesser prices for smaller animals.

"Here's a dollar for the four of us," Uncle Sam said, leaning over his saddle and handing the man the coin.

"It will be another twenty cents for the lot of you," he said. "You're all bigger than most, especially that one. He's as big as two men." He pointed to Bear.

"I'll pay ye the twenty cents," Da said with a snarl. "But that better be the end of it. Na more charges."

The ferryman nodded, pocketed the coins, and then motioned them forward.

Da eyed the ferry warily. "How many men have drowned takin' this thing?"

"A hell of a lot less than have made it safely across," the man said, beginning to show his impatience. "Are you goin' across or not?"

"Are ye this surly with all yer paying customers?" Bear asked him.

"Na. Only the ones who ask too many senseless questions," he snapped.

His father started to dismount. At once, Uncle Sam moved his mount up next to Whiskey and placed a firm grip on Da's shoulder. "Leave him be, Bear. We need his help to cross this river."

Da growled from deep in his throat but kept his mouth shut and his bottom in the saddle.

Alexander sighed with relief. The ferryman would never know how close he came to being attacked by a man, who when angered, could be every bit as ferocious as a real bear.

"We're ready to cross, good Sir," Uncle Sam told the man.

The four of them dismounted and led their horses single file across the ramp and onto the plank deck of the ferry, which appeared to be about forty feet long by eight feet wide. Uncle Sam boarded first. Having made numerous ferry crossings in his life, he showed no worry at all as he led Steel, who also appeared calm. Next came Rory, leading Buck, followed by Alexander and Thunder. Da and Whiskey boarded last.

The ferryman raised the ramp, and he and his two helpers took up three of the sturdy poles and plunged them against the river bottom and bank to push off.

As they took off, Alexander nearly lost his footing on the slippery surface as Thunder set back and raised his head. "Whoa, whoa, boy," he tried to soothe.

Thunder wasn't responding and squealed in wide-eyed terror. Clearly, the gelding didn't understand or trust the vessel and penned his ears back against his head.

Alexander wondered if Thunder could even make it across the river. Would the horse leap off and get carried well downstream by the current? He had just grown used to the gelding and was already quite attached to him. If the horse did jump off, should he jump in too and go after him?

Alexander struggled to control his horse even as the ferryman yelled, "Keep your bloody horse under control."

"Hang on," Da told him. "I'll help ye."

"Hold Buck's reins," he heard Rory tell his father. "I'll go help

too.”

“Hang on a second,” Uncle Sam told Rory. “I’ve seen this before. Just watch.”

Da swiftly tied Whiskey’s reins together and then looped them over his horse’s saddle. He came up behind Thunder, but that seemed to scare the gelding even more. Thankfully the horse didn’t kick, but he pranced and pulled against the reins as Alexander held tight.

Since the oarsman occupied the extra space on the left, his father sidled between the horse and the flatboat’s right edge, as the vessel moved out into deeper waters and the three boatmen began rowing.

Alexander yelped as Da nearly lost his balance and fell into the river, but he managed to grab the stirrup and regain his balance.

In a soft voice, he began speaking to Thunder in Gaelic. Da continued to speak for some moments in a soft, lilting voice.

Alexander glanced back towards Whiskey. Da’s gelding hadn’t moved and was so relaxed he lowered his head and lifted a foot.

He had no idea what his father was saying to Thunder, but it seemed to be working. Soon the gelding’s ears relaxed and his big eyes became calm again.

“What did you say to him?” Alexander asked.

“Probably words so soothing they would calm a nervous virgin,” Rory quipped.

“Aye,” Bear said with a chuckle.

Then Da sang *Over the Water to Charlie* all the way across the river until the ramp was lowered on the west bank of the Mississippi.

They disembarked at the riverbank, and his father glared at the ferryman as he led Whiskey off the craft.

Each of them walked their horse up through the mud onto dry ground before mounting. As he settled into the saddle, Alexander gave thanks that they’d all safely made it across the mighty river. Now it felt like he was truly in the West. How would this wild land

alter his life? The question made both unease and excitement hurtle through his chest in equal measure. Would he have the courage required of men in this untamed land? Alexander straightened his back and looked forward as he faced the unknown.

Jessica stepped away from Rebecca's house, feeling cheerful after having spent time with her best friend. It was always good to talk to another woman, particularly one her own age. And after hearing how much joy being married brought Rebecca, Jessica felt hopeful that someday she would know the same kind of happiness.

At once, Donny rose from a spot beneath the shady darkness of a nearby oak tree. He dusted off his clothing and called out to her. "Jessica!"

Stunned, Jessica stared, open-mouthed. She could not believe Donny still loitered outside. The sight of him sent another rush of anger ripping through her. She whirled around and marched back inside, locking the door behind her.

"Did you forget something?" Rebecca asked as she came into the front room.

"Donny is still out there! He's been waiting for me all this time."

Rebecca went to the window and peered out. "Now this is getting ridiculous."

"It's maddening. What am I going to do? He won't listen to reason."

"Perhaps because he sees himself as the victim in this."

"Victim? I haven't led him on or toyed with him!"

Rebecca faced her. "I know. But he thinks you belong to him. Or should belong to him. He's picked you for his wife, and he is obviously living some fantasy believing that you're destined to be

together.”

Jessica threw up her hands. “He’s inventing a romantic relationship—one that seems to be growing stronger in his mind with every hour that passes.”

Rebecca nodded. “Yes, but we don’t know how long this has gone on in his mind. He could have been fantasizing about you for weeks. Or from the first moment he saw you.”

“But why me?”

“Because you are the loveliest unmarried woman in town. And because you’re good and kind and all the things a man could want in a woman.”

Jessica shook her head. “I don’t think so. It’s something else.”

“Maybe. But what?”

“I’m afraid to find out.” The absurdity of the situation baffled her. “What do I do now?”

“We need to get you to your father. I’ll have one of our hands get my buggy, then I’ll take you back to the store.”

“Thank you,” she said, relieved that she wouldn’t have to face the man again.

They left out the back door and soon were on their way in the small one-horse buggy. Rebecca gently snapped the leathers and hurried the horse past the house and then past Donny.

Donny called out to her, “Please, Jessica, stop and talk to me. Just for a moment.”

They passed by without slowing, and Jessica tried to ignore him, not even looking his way.

“Stop!” Donny yelled.

Jessica feared that Donny would follow them, but in the swift buggy, they would be able to get to the store well ahead of him.

They made good time until they got to the town’s main street, which was crowded with wagons of all sorts. Rebecca had to weave her way around them and slow several times for people crossing the street. Jessica’s impatience grew with each delay.

“Your father will be at the store won’t he?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes, he should be, but will you come inside with me just to be sure?”

“Of course.”

“Go around to the back,” Jessica suggested. “Then Donny won’t see your buggy tied in front of the store.”

As they went toward the side of the building, they both glanced down the street but didn’t see any sign of Donny. Rebecca steered the horse buggy through the alley and pulled up on the reins when she reached the store’s loading dock.

Donny stood there, red-faced and breathing heavily. Sweat poured off his brow. Clearly, he’d run the entire way.

Even with her best friend at her side, Jessica felt like a cornered animal.

They both sprang off the buggy’s seat as quickly as they could.

“Father!” Jessica called while Rebecca tied the horse. She wanted to run inside but couldn’t leave Rebecca alone.

Donny trailed after her. “Why are you doing this to me? Don’t you care about me?”

Rebecca scurried to catch up to her and then positioned herself between them. “Mr. Farley, don’t you think you are being far too insistent in your pursuit of Jessica?”

“No, Rebecca,” he said, his stare boring into Jessica.

“My name is Mrs. Wyllie, to you,” Rebecca told him.

Donny ignored the rebuke and continued to gape at Jessica as he said, “Although I have admired her for some time and grown to know her over the past few months, I’ve only just begun my serious courtship of sweet Jessica.”

“What courtship? There is no courtship!” Jessica told him. “And there never will be.”

“But of course there is,” Donny said as though she were daft. “I’ve known that I would court you for a long time. Ever since that first time you came into the bank, months ago, and you smiled at me.”

Jessica tried to remember when he referred to. She went to the

bank often to make deposits from the store's sales. And, being a friendly person, she often smiled at people, not just him. Had he taken an innocent smile and made it something more?

Donny took a step closer. "And every time I've come into this store, you've greeted me with warmth and eagerness."

She greeted all their customers with warmth and eagerness. That didn't mean anything. Or did it? Had she given him the wrong impression?

"Jessica, allow me to court you properly."

Before she could respond, her father came out of the store's double back doors and scrutinized the three of them. Alarm registered on Pa's face when he glanced at her.

"What is going on here?" Pa asked, "Mr. Farley, I thought I told you to leave my daughter alone?"

"I know you want to protect your daughter, Sir," Donny said. "But she is no longer a child. It's past time she married. Her beauty should not be wasted on some dirty cowhand or common yeoman farmer. She needs to marry a man like me. An educated man of dignity and civility. A man who can provide a fine life for her."

"I don't need you to tell me what my daughter needs," Pa said, his voice firm.

"Apparently you do, Sir. You allow her to work here doing hard, menial work. When she's not pushing dust around with a broom, she's no more than a hired store clerk. She should be dressing in fine gowns and sipping tea with other prominent ladies like Mrs. Wyllie here."

Jessica glanced at her father and saw guilt register on his face. She glared at Donny as she said, "I just came from a visit with Rebecca. A visit you rudely interrupted."

"Only because I want what's best for you. You deserve to live a life of luxury, being waited on by servants."

"Leave now, before I send one of my clerks for the sheriff," Pa said.

"The sheriff is a friend of mine. He won't care about romantic

endeavors among two young people. But I'll leave," Donny said. "For now. I need to get back to work anyway. Think about what I've said, Mr. Harrison. Before it's too late."

Donny marched off toward his father's bank.

All three of them stared after him.

Too late for what? Jessica frowned, wondering if he referred to their bank loan or something else.

Two days later, a young man that Jessica recognized as one of the bank's tellers brought a note to Harrison's. In very large letters, Jessica's name flowed across the envelope in an elaborate script. She opened the missive and read,

My Darling Jessica,

It is my heartfelt desire to see you this evening for dinner so that I may convey my true feelings, which I believe you have yet to understand.

Please join me at 7:00 o'clock at the Yellow Rose.

Your earnest suitor,

Donny

Jessica reread the note with widened eyes. "Unbelievable."

"What is it?" Father asked as he moved a new barrel of flour into position.

"Read this." She handed him the note. A note that was both unexpected and unwanted.

"Good heavens. This is more serious than I thought."

She had hoped that since she hadn't seen Donny in two days that he had abandoned his pursuit, but her heart sank with disappointment as she realized nothing had changed.

"What am I going to do?"

"You're not going to do anything. I'll go talk to Mr. Farley and his father at the bank and end this disgrace once and for all." Pa

handed the note back to her, untied his apron, and grabbed his coat before rushing out the front door.

For the past week, bottomlands, bayous, and swamps had made overland travel through the Arkansas Territory slow and difficult. During the day, mosquitos in great numbers emerged out of the marshes and waters and continuously whizzed among them with high-pitched hums. And at night, the itchy bites the pests inflicted plagued them and often kept them awake.

Finally, they entered an area known as the Piney Woods, and Rory was struck by a sense of great solitude and peace of mind in the deep forest where immense, ancient pines rose from the ground like pillars. The well-developed understory that grew beneath the tree canopy included yaupon holly and flowering dogwood and made the area seem even more serene. Since they had skirted around the area inhabited by Caddo Indians, he hoped it would stay serene.

His father had kept them on a steady southwesterly course, and they were headed toward Milam. There they would cross into Texas on the ferry that was supposed to operate there.

Rory had to admit, he and Alexander would have gotten lost dozens of times without his father and uncle's unerring sense of direction. Nonetheless, he was learning more and more every day he spent on the trail with his father and Bear, and so was Alexander.

Sometimes, the open prairies and thick woods held no road at all, or if there was one, it was little more than a rope of a trail. His father had taught them both how to find their way using the flow

of water, the direction of the wind, moss on rocks and trees, and, of course, the Sun's direction of movement. At night, he would verify their course using the stars. While hunting with his father at night as he'd grown up, Rory had already learned how to use the stars for navigation. But Alexander hadn't so that night around their campfire, Father patiently explained as he pointed to the Big Dipper.

"Do you see the two stars that form the right side of that dipper bowl?" Father asked Alexander.

Alexander stared skyward. "Yes. There and there."

"Now follow those two directly to the star they point to. Do you see a bright star?"

"Yes."

"That's the North Star," Father said. "When you face the North Star, your left side will always be pointed west."

Uncle Bear nodded as he added a little more whiskey to his coffee. "Aye, and the Big Dipper, what astronomers call Ursa Major or the Great Bear, circles around the North Star durin' the night, like a bear circlin' its prey, lookin' for a way to attack."

"What if you can't see the North Star?" Alexander asked.

"Unless it's cloudy, you can always see it. It doesn't sink below the horizon at night," Father said.

"I understand that the North Star is always north," Rory said. "What I don't understand is *why* it is always north?"

Father added a couple of logs to the fire sending small glimmering sparks upwards toward the stars they spoke about. "Because in the Northern Hemisphere, at any hour of the night, at any time of the year, you can always find it, and it is always found in a due northerly direction," Father explained.

"But why? I still don't understand," Rory said. "All the other stars move."

"When I was your age, and I worked as a guide and mapmaker, I wondered about that too, so I studied up on it," Father said. "You're right. All the other stars move. But the North Star is

positioned in the sky in line with the earth's axis point. If you were at the North Pole, the North Star would be directly overhead. It is the *only* bright star whose position to a rotating Earth does not change."

"It does na rise or set," Uncle Bear told them, "but remains in the same spot year-round while the other stars circle around it. 'Tis the compass God made so we can always find our way."

During Rory's schooling, astronomy had never been one of his favorite subjects, but he found this explanation fascinating and practical.

Navigating in the wilderness wasn't the only thing he and Alexander were learning. Bear, being the food lover that he was, taught them how to cook over an open fire. The lessons began with tracking and hunting all sorts of game, then butchering, and finally roasting their meat over the cook fire. He also showed them which plants and berries were edible and how to find wild onions and other seasonings. At every town, Bear had replenished their supplies, so they had yet to run out of any essential, including whiskey, which his uncle sometimes used for seasoning as well as a libation.

Despite the challenges of procuring and making food, Rory and Alexander had found that their appetites had only increased while eating outside around their campfires. What Bear managed to prepare quite often tasted better than anything Greta had brought to the dining table at home.

But perhaps the most important skill they were learning involved using weapons. Several times a week, they practiced shooting, both with a pistol and with a rifle. Each time, Alexander became a better shot. Rory was already a decent shot and rarely missed what he aimed for, but he asked Father to give them lessons in throwing a knife and had Bear share his tips on how to best use a hatchet as a weapon.

"When your powder is wet, or you're out of lead, your life could depend on using a knife or hatchet well," Father told them.

“And they can be just as deadly. So never go *anywhere* without your knife or hatchet, preferably both.”

“And keep them sharp,” Bear advised. “Only dull men keep dull weapons.”

Rory wondered what else his father and uncle knew that they hadn’t yet shared with them. He was certain there was much more he and Alexander would learn over the coming months. He vowed to keep his mind receptive to learning, because as Bear often said, “Knowledge weighs nothing. But ignorance is a heavy stone.”

The next day, a gentle shower, little more than a thick mist, fell upon them all afternoon. Rory inhaled deeply, enjoying the earthy scent produced when rain falls on dry soil.

Up ahead, a few turkeys fluttered and raced across their path, startling the horses.

Alexander did a good job of keeping Thunder under control despite the scare the turkeys gave both horse and rider.

Uncle Sam raised a hand. It was the signal for silence. Then Sam unsheathed his longknife his weapon of choice because he was faster with it than most men were with their pistols. Even in the moist air beneath the trees, the knife’s steel flashed menacingly.

The rest of them tugged their mounts to a halt and froze. No one spoke, but Rory and Alexander followed the example of the two older men and withdrew their weapons.

“Hands up!” a voice called from the trees. “Now!”

No one moved.

Robbers? Rory quickly scanned the forest ahead, looking for the source of the chilling demand.

“Nay,” Bear shouted. “Come out and show yerself like a man. *If* ye are one.”

The challenge to the fellow’s manhood worked.

“All right,” the voice said. “I will.”

“And me.”

“And yours truly.”

“Me too.”

From behind the trees a short distance ahead, the four voices and two more, all six on foot, slowly emerged. Their ruthless, filthy looks and rough, grimy clothing made Rory think they were highwaymen or smugglers or both. The six all held pistols in their dirty hands.

Rory's already rapidly beating heart skipped a beat, but he steeled his heart and reminded himself to aim carefully. Could he keep his father safe from these robbers? His uncle? His cousin? He only knew one thing, if he had to, he would die trying to protect them.

Uncle Bear slowly moved Whiskey forward and beside Father.

Rory and Alexander remained behind them, but Rory moved his gelding slightly to the side. Alexander did the same on the other side.

The four of them stared at the six for a moment, the surrounding forest eerily quiet now.

As a slight breeze cooled the damp hair on his neck, Rory readied himself for trouble.

"Who the devil are ye?" Bear asked. "Wood fairies?"

The man who stepped out first seemed to find Bear's questions amusing. He chuckled and then asked, "Why the devil do you want to know?"

"Just so we can tell the local sheriff who we killed," Bear said.

With a half-smile, the fellow said, "Jean Lafitte at your service. And these are my kinsman."

Several of the robbers snickered.

Even in Kentucky, Rory had heard that the famous privateer had died last year.

"I assume that since you asked us to put our hands up, that you men intend to rob us?" Father asked, his longknife resting in his hand on his right leg.

The fellow stared maliciously as the others behind him sneered and looked on. "That's right, old man," the leader answered. "We..."

In the next split second, Father's knife speared into the man's chest, dead center.

In the rest of the same second, Bear's pistol boomed.

Lead drilled into the chest of another thief.

Before the other robbers could even blink in shock, Father fired his pistol. The shot blew through the forehead of his target.

At the same time, Bear flung his hatchet, cutting the neck of one of the other thieves nearly in two.

Two more men went down.

Rory carefully aimed his weapon at the remaining robber closest to him. Alexander must have done the same because they simultaneously fired their pistols when the two remaining thieves raised their weapons to shoot.

The last two thieves slid to a forest floor covered with the dead. So did Alexander.

The acrid scent of black powder and tang of blood filled the air. The smell of it made Rory shiver as he stared in disbelief at his cousin lying in the pine needles.

"Alexander!" Bear shouted, leaped off his horse, and bounded toward his son.

In another second, Rory also knelt at his cousin's side.

Blood poured out the side of Alexander's neck. There was so much of it Rory couldn't tell how bad the wound was.

Bear gaped at the wound, and the blood drained from his face as he placed a trembling big hand lightly on his son's chest.

Rory pressed his handkerchief against the wound and held it there to absorb the blood. He held his breath as he waited to learn if Alexander still breathed.

After what seemed like forever, Bear said, "He's breathin'."

"Thank God," Rory whispered.

"Take a look," Bear said, his voice shaky. "How bad is it?"

Rory moved the cloth aside to reveal a long gash on the side of Alexander's neck.

"They're all dead," Father said, joining them and bending close

to Alexander. "Looks like it's just a flesh wound."

"Thank Ye, Lord," Bear breathed. His uncle leaned over and gently kissed Alexander's forehead.

At his father's touch, Alexander's eyelids fluttered open, and he drew a long, shuddering breath. "I'm shot?"

"Aye, Son, but 'tis a minor gash. The lead grazed yer neck," Bear said.

Rory could still see alarm in his cousin's green eyes, so he tried to make him smile. "Yup, I've had worse mosquito bites."

It worked. Alexander grinned and said, "Braggart."

Bear chuckled. "We'll pour some whiskey on it in a bit. 'Tis yer first battle wound."

"You shot well," Father told him. "You killed the man you shot."

Alexander's eyes widened. "I killed a man?"

"*Thou shalt na steal*," Bear said in a stern Scottish burr.

Donny glanced up from his ledgers when Mr. Harrison strode through the bank's double mahogany doors. Was Jessica's father here to do banking or to make trouble? Judging by the sour look on Harrison's face and his determined stride, it looked like trouble.

Donny sprang from his small desk in the corner and went to him.

"I would like to see your father," Harrison demanded without greeting him. "Is he in?"

"What is this about, Sir?" Donny asked him.

"You know darn well what it is about. Now get out of my way." Harrison shoved him aside.

Donny had anticipated that this would happen. He wasn't worried. He'd already made his father aware of his courtship of Jessica and that she was being a nervous filly.

Father had assured him that he would do all he could to help further Donny's efforts. In fact, Father believed an alliance with Jessica and Mr. Harrison would be financially beneficial. Harrison's store was an asset he intended to acquire anyway. Its location at the entryway to Texas meant it would be a moneymaker for years to come. And they could use all the cash they could get right now.

Donny followed Harrison through the open door into his father's spacious office. Light streamed in through the bar-covered windows onto his father's stocky form. Father did not rise from his large oak desk, where he was working on a financing plan to enable the soldiers of the fort to be paid. His father had hit upon

the idea of issuing paper money to be backed by the specie due from the central government as wages to the fort's soldiers. Donny didn't quite understand how it would all work, but his father did.

Someday it would be his office—where he would direct the affairs of a dozen banks. He intended to surpass his father's success. He was tired of being second in command of the bank and being treated like he didn't have a lick of sense by everyone. He would make his own money. Lots of it. Recently, he'd talked his father into investing in his new business. Father had only one requirement. Profit.

Donny had no doubts that his venture would be profitable. He'd made arrangements with some cunning partners to smuggle contraband goods into Nacogdoches. Those goods were stored out of town, hidden in a cave, but would soon be sold. He had a buyer already lined up.

To become hugely successful, though, he would also need the support of the most influential citizens in Texas, including the governor. Until he married, the governor and other prominent Texas citizens would continue to consider him just his father's subordinate underling.

So marrying Jessica would serve two purposes. He would gain her father's profitable store with its steady cash flow, and as a stable married man, he would be respected.

"Mr. Farley, I must speak to you about an urgent matter. Preferably alone," Harrison said with a sideways glance at Donny.

"Whatever your business is, Mr. Harrison, my son will be happy to assist you as well," Father said. "How is your beautiful daughter?"

"She is greatly upset by your son's unwanted attentions."

"She's just being modest and bashful," Donny said. "She'll warm up to me in time."

"Jessica has made it clear to Donny that she has no interest in his courtship of her, but he refuses to listen and has become a true nuisance."

"Surely you exaggerate," Father said.

"I do not, Sir. You must make your son understand that she means it when she says no."

"Can't you persuade Jessica to give Donny a chance?" Father asked. "He is, after all, from a prominent family. He would make a fine husband for her. And he's a handsome young gentleman if I do say so."

"Thank you, Father."

"A *gentleman* listens to a lady when she declines his attentions," Harrison said.

"Certainly, you and I should not interfere with young love," Father said.

"There is no love! That's the problem. Jessica has no affection for Donny."

"But she will," Donny protested. "I just need more time to show her how much I care about her. Please encourage her to accept my invitation to dinner."

Mr. Harrison rolled his eyes.

His father chuckled and said, "I have high hopes that our two children will not only court but eventually marry. Perhaps someday they will have beautiful grandchildren for us to share."

No, Donny thought, no children. He only wanted Jessica to make it easier for him to get in the doors of prominent citizens and high-ranking Mexican officials. And for the money-spinning store that her father owned. He had no interest in children. They were merely pesky, noisy, dirty urchins, and he wanted no part of them.

Stepping closer to Harrison, he said in his most contrite and humble voice, "Sir, please be patient with me, and with Jessica. Perhaps I have been a bit overzealous. Can you blame me? She is so beautiful. I can think of little else but her. But my intentions are honorable."

"If you are an honorable gentleman, you'll agree to leave Jessica alone," Harrison declared.

"Maybe she just needs a little time to get over being nervous,"

his father suggested. "It's not unusual for young, chaste women to shrink from a man's attentions. They are, after all, delicate creatures."

Donny nodded. "Perhaps I should curb my courtship *for now*."

Harrison cleared his throat. "If you don't, I will have no choice but to contact our new sheriff."

Father came around from behind his big desk and gave Harrison's back a friendly pat. "I'm certain one day we'll be celebrating a wedding together. The biggest and best wedding ever seen in Nacogdoches. I'll have cases of the best wine and whiskey brought here from New Orleans. Don't you worry at all about the cost, I'll throw a party to be remembered."

"That's not going to happen," Harrison said matter of factly. "Because a wedding between our children is not going to happen!"

Father's face grew deadly serious. "I'd think twice about that. Your daughter's future will be far more secure with my son as her husband."

Harrison shook his head and stepped back. "You, Sir, are as stubborn as your son. Both of you must understand Jessica is not interested. And, in all honesty, neither am I. We have no wish to offend you, but Jessica does not wish to see this relationship move forward. And, I assure you, her future is perfectly secure with me."

His father's face grew noticeably red. "Can you be so certain? You, Sir, must persuade your daughter that the joining of our two families is in her best interest. *And yours*."

Harrison's jaw clenched. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm merely trying to help you see the entire picture here," Father told him. "If you know what's good for you and your store, you will bloody well listen."

"I see the picture," Harrison snarled. He spun around and marched out.

"He's being so unreasonable," Donny complained.

"I want that store, one way or the other," Father said. "It's the most profitable store in Nacogdoches. By far. But Harrison will

never sell. He's smart enough to know its potential."

"So, what does that mean?"

"That means we have to find a way to take it. The simplest way is through marriage. A married woman's rights to property are controlled by her husband."

"How far should I go to get her to marry me?" Donny asked.

"Whatever it takes."

Stephen rode beside his youngest son toward the Tyler Sugar Plantation. They'd left his oldest son, Samuel, in charge of their hands and the cattle herd. The newly established Wyllie Cattle and Horse Company was progressing well. They'd already built sorting pens, a barn, and shed. And they'd fenced two lots to work cattle and a paddock for their horses. Soon, they would start setting up the horse operation as well, and so they'd also built several mangers for feeding oats. And they'd stockpiled chaff, a mixture of chopped hay and straw, and a good supply of oats.

Today, at the town's monthly horse auction, he and Steve were hoping to acquire some nice horses for breeding or training.

As they rode, Stephen thought about his oldest brother, Sam. His brother's horse operation in Kentucky was renowned for breeding fine horses. Although he missed William and Edward too, he greatly missed Sam. And Bear. Most of all, he missed his two daughters, Martha and Polly, and their families. He swallowed the regret that rose up inside him. He'd promised to visit all of them at Christmas at least every other year. Yet he'd been gone thirteen years, and he hadn't been back once. That sometimes ate at him because he was a man of his word. And it troubled him for another reason. That's where Jane was buried. And he wanted to visit her grave one more time before he died.

But every time he thought he might be able to get away, his four sons had needed him. Until now, his sons hadn't been ready to be left on their own in the wild place that was frontier Texas.

Together, they'd faced Indians, horse thieves, bandits, corrupt officials, and worst of all, mother nature. Spring floods along the Red River destroyed all their homes, forcing them to move south to Nacogdoches.

Samuel, Thomas, and Steve were now solidly reestablished in Nacogdoches and had put down roots of their own.

He frowned, though, as he considered the politically unstable situation here in Mexican Texas. Could he ever risk leaving his sons in a situation this volatile? A situation that could blow up into a war and jeopardize their futures? Even their lives?

To increase settler numbers, Mexico had enacted the General Colonization Law. Americans were welcomed into the region to fight Indians and stabilize the border. The law was supposed to enable all heads of households to acquire land in Mexican Texas. Settlers, mostly yeoman farmers, from Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Missouri, moved to Texas. Many were unable to acquire the promised land and were becoming increasingly disgruntled. These Americans kept their own culture and showed little interest in Catholicism and other aspects of Mexican culture.

The result was a Texas rapidly turning into an American province filled with the fantastically rich and the tragically poor.

As Stephen and Steve rode up, the Tyler's large and elegant home and sprawling sugar plantation underscored the fact that Steve's inlaws were among the fantastically rich. But Mr. Tyler hadn't gotten rich over the backs of slaves. All his workers were not only paid, they were well clothed and housed, something Stephen greatly admired.

"We'll just water the horses and get something to drink ourselves before we go into town. The auction doesn't start until noon," Steve said as they arrived at the Tyler home. Steve had been living there since his marriage to Rebecca last month. Stephen missed having his youngest living with him, but at least they got to work together every day. More importantly, Steve was happier than he'd ever seen him.

"Sounds good," Stephen said. "I am thirsty."

After they tied the horses at the water trough, they went inside. The house was filled with the scent of something freshly baked. The smell brought back bittersweet memories. Jane, who had died after giving birth to Steve, used to bake often. He still missed everything about her. Her touch, her voice, her love most of all. He guessed he would always feel the pain that even now struck at his heart. The hurt returned time and again, a heartache that he could conceal but not banish.

"Steve!" Rebecca said as they went inside. "I didn't expect you back this morning."

"We're on our way to the horse auction, but Father and I thought we might get something to drink first. It's already hot out there."

"Good morning, Father Wyllie. I'll get you some water. And I just made some fresh coffee and doughnuts," Rebecca told them with a smile. "And I have a pound cake I made yesterday too."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Stephen said.

"Do you want to go to the horse auction?" Steve asked.

"Not this time. Father and I will be working on a new bookkeeping system this afternoon. But I'm glad you're both here. I need to tell you about a problem my friend, Jessica, has. She's the daughter of the man who owns Harrison's."

"I know her," Stephen said. "We met at your wedding and she's helped me at the store numerous times. Nice young lady. Steve said she was your best friend."

"Yes, she is."

"What's her problem?" Steve asked.

Mrs. Tyler joined them in the front room. After they all greeted Rebecca's mother, Rebecca answered Steve's question.

"Jessica is being pursued by Donny Farley, the son of the bank owner. He won't take no for an answer and keeps trying to court her."

"Why doesn't she want him to?" Stephen asked.

“Donny is boring, rude, and only wants Jessica because of her beauty—to further his banking business.”

“I’m not the least bit surprised,” Mrs. Tyler said. “I always thought that young man was going to mean trouble. Every time I’ve been in the bank, he’s been annoyingly solicitous. He just seems two-faced to me. And his father is cut from the same cloth.”

“I got the same impression,” Stephen said.

“Rebecca, we need to serve refreshments to Mr. Wyllie and your husband. Judging from their clothing, they’ve already put in a long morning’s work.”

“We started at sunrise,” Steve said.

“I was still asleep when you left,” Rebecca told him. “Follow me, gentlemen.”

They moved into the kitchen at the back of the big, two-story house and remained standing while they drank coffee and ate doughnuts. They discussed Jessica’s problem for a few minutes, but none of them had a good solution. Mr. Tyler joined them, and Rebecca explained her friend’s problem to her father.

“I could pull my money out of his bank,” Tyler said and took a bite of his doughnut.

Rebecca’s eyes grew as wide as the doughnut her father was eating. “Do you think that will matter to Mr. Farley?”

“Well, I believe I may be his largest depositor.”

“Let me know if the situation worsens,” Stephen told Rebecca. “I’ve had considerable experience dealing with difficult people.”

Afterward, Stephen watched as Steve kissed Rebecca goodbye. Seeing them brought back bittersweet memories.

Once they were on their way, Steve said, “Her kisses are sweeter than her doughnuts.”

Stephen chuckled at his newlywed son.

They arrived at the auction in time to get a good look at all the

horses coming up for sale. Stephen took his time becoming familiar with each horse and looking them over, pointing out to Steve what he liked or didn't like about each one. "There's a lot more to a good horse than a shiny coat," he told his son.

"You can tell a lot about a horse by looking into their eyes," Steve said. "Just like people."

Stephen raised his dark brows. "Indeed."

"Speaking of people with a shiny coat, there's Donny Farley." Steve inclined his head toward Farley. He was dressed impeccably in a coat with broad shoulders and puffed sleeves, a narrow waist, and full tails, and he wore it over smart trousers. "He's the one with the black top hat. Who wears a top hat to a horse auction?"

"It seems that he does. Let's go say hello."

"Father, don't..." Steve said.

But Stephen continued on. He never put off dealing with people who needed dealing with. He wove his way through the men waiting for the auction to begin until he reached Farley. "Mr. Farley."

"Mr. Wyllie. Steve. Good day to you," Donny said. He smiled at them, but the forced smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Mr. Farley, I understand that you have behaved in an ungentlemanly fashion pursuing Miss Harrison. As a friend of the family, I urge you in no uncertain terms to cease," he said. He regarded Farley with intensity as he waited for a response.

Flustered, Farley cleared his throat for a moment before saying, "My courtship of Miss Harrison is none of your affair."

Stephen cocked his head. "I'm making it my affair. If you persist, my son and I will have to teach you some lessons on how to conduct yourself as a gentleman. I assure you learning to listen to a woman when she says no is one of the first lessons."

"Jessica is my wife's best friend," Steve told Farley. "That makes it my affair too. I don't think you will want to test either one of us."

Farley stuttered and then said, "Hmph!" before storming out.

“Now, let’s find some horses with something beneath a shiny coat,” he told Steve.

The burly auctioneer stood on a platform above the crowd of men. Stephen and Steve found a spot with a good view of the pen where the horses would come in. The dusty auction area smelled of horseflesh and the sweat of hardworking farmers and planters.

From the onset, the bidding was rapid-fire and competitive. He and Steve offered on six horses and won the bid on four.

They soon headed back home, each towing two horses behind their mounts, a yearling named Young Alistair, a stud horse named Wild Harry, a five-year-old racehorse named Robin Hood, and a beautiful broodmare named Highland Lass. Wild Harry and Robin Hood would be bred with some of the wild mustangs mares they’d captured. The broodmare would be bred to his black stallion, George. Young Alistair would be gelded right away and trained for ranch work. And they would shorten his pompous name is just Al.

He glanced over at his son and caught him smiling broadly. Steve’s dream of owning a horse operation was becoming a reality.

After their encounter with the robbers, Rory's father worried that the route into Louisiana might be more dangerous because they would have to pass through the Neutral Ground, an area that had been claimed by two countries. Sometimes called 'No Man's Land,' ownership of the lawless strip went to the United States three years ago with the Adams-Onís Treaty, signed in 1821. They had thought that the signing of the treaty would have made the area safer, but obviously, outlaws were still making travel in the neutral strip dangerous and unprofitable.

Well, at least now No Man's Land held six fewer thieves, Rory thought.

After some discussion, they decided to change course. Instead of heading due south to cross the Sabine River, they would head southwesterly and cross the Red River at the little settlement of Fulton. They were better off traveling through the still unpopulated area between Fulton and Nacogdoches.

At Fulton, they learned of a woman who made first-class buckskin shirts of great durability. Since both of Rory's linen shirts were ripped in several places, and the fabric did little to protect him from mosquitos or tree branches, he decided to buy two. The woman and her husband, a fellow named Jap Hunt, managed to create a living from what nature readily provided. He shot the deer and sold the dried meat to travelers, and she made shirts from the hides. Rory had to admire their entrepreneurship as he enjoyed the comfortable buckskin shirt and tasty dried venison they were all

chewing on as they rode the final miles to reach Texas.

The ferry at Fulton got them across the Red River without a major incident, although Thunder still didn't like ferry crossings. This time, however, Alexander was able to control his horse himself. He merely did what Bear had done. He sang off-tune to the gelding during the entire crossing.

The Red River's south bank and well beyond held evidence of the recent floodwaters—debris, dried mud, and logs littered the ground. The force of the churning water must have been monumental. A power that would destroy everything in its path.

After riding past the flood debris, they rode into heavily wooded terrain for several hours. So far, Rory thought Texas was a beautiful and inviting country. New ways of thinking, new jobs, and new lives were all possible on the vast woods and plains of the frontier. Fish, game, wildlife, and buffalo thrived. And timber, fertile land, and good water abounded. No wonder his Uncle Stephen and Baldy raved about Texas. If he didn't love Kentucky so much, he would have to give Texas some consideration.

As always, when the other three were quiet, his thoughts soon drifted to the woman he had created in his mind. *I'm almost there*, he told her. *Wait for me*. In his mind's eye, she smiled tenderly, and his heart warmed at the sight.

When they paused that afternoon to rest and water the horses at the next stream, Rory dismounted, glad for the opportunity to stretch his long legs.

"Uncle Sam, how far now?" Alexander asked, a question he seemed to repeat at every stop they made.

His cousin had the patience of a five-year-old.

With Bear's twice-daily stinging applications of whiskey to the wound, Alexander's neck was healing nicely. However, he would have a good-sized scar.

"Best guess, about a hundred miles," Father said.

"Our horses have gotten into good travel shape," Rory said. "The terrain is mostly flat or gently rolling plains. The trails are in

decent condition. So if the weather stays pleasant, we may be there in three days. So for the love of God, Alexander, will you please stop asking how far?"

"Aye, well," Bear said as he removed Whiskey's saddle, "we'll be there soon enough, lads. And then we'll celebrate with the thieves' money."

They had searched the pockets of the robbers looking for a letter, deed, or some other way to identify who they were. They only found a considerable amount of gold and silver on them. There was no way of knowing who the coins belonged to, but Uncle Sam had collected it all and hid it in a small pouch sewn into the corner of his blanket. The dead men's six pistols were of poor quality and condition, so they left them, and they found no sign that the thieves owned horses.

Rory had expected that he and Alexander would have to dig graves for the six men, but Uncle Bear had said no.

"I do na believe in diggin' a grave that ye canna in good faith put a holy cross over," he had said. "I willna have ye waste yer time doin' such a thing."

Father had firmly agreed. "I only dig graves for men of good repute or soldiers, so I won't ask you two to dig them either. We leave the bodies to whatever Mother Nature or Father Time decide will happen to them."

His father's hard stance had surprised Rory. But after giving it some thought on the long, lonely miles since then, he concluded that those men had decided their fate long ago. To be treated with respect in death, a man must live a respectful life.

"Instead of spending it, we should give the robbers' coins to some worthy cause," Rory suggested.

"Perhaps a school," Alexander said.

"Melly has started an orphanage in Nacogdoches," Father said as he removed his stallion's saddle and set it aside. "I'm sure Baldy's clinic there could use the funds as well." Melly and Baldy, who was both a doctor and a preacher, were like family to Uncle

Stephen and his sons. They had all moved to Texas together. “We’ll let them decide how to put the funds to best use.”

As usual, Uncle Bear and Father went off into the woods first to do their private business while Alexander and Rory stayed behind to guard the horses and wait their turn.

Rory glanced over at his cousin. Since the shooting, Alexander had grown unusually quiet. And he stayed up later and rose earlier than Rory did. His normally fresh and fine-looking features appeared weary and drained. Was his cousin’s conscience bothering him?

As soon as Father and Bear were out of earshot, Rory asked, “Are you still brooding over shooting that man?”

Alexander leaned against a tree. “No...I don’t know... maybe.”

“Why?” Rory prodded.

His cousin stared at the ground. “The commandment says thou shalt not kill.”

“The commandment means thou shalt not *murder*,” he said gently.

“But what if they were only going to rob us, not kill us?”

“Men like that don’t leave witnesses. They would have killed us and taken our horses.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Alexander, you were defending yourself. He was trying to kill you, as you can plainly see by that rip across your neck.”

Alexander raked his fingers through his gold-red hair. “Tell me, have you ever killed before that?” His green eyes reflected the doubt that troubled his heart.

Rory shook his head. “No, that was my first, too.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?” Alexander asked.

“It would if I’d had a choice. But I didn’t. It was him or me. If he didn’t want to be killed, then he shouldn’t have been with a band of thieves. For all we know, they were a gang of murderers. Father didn’t hesitate, and neither did Bear. They were incredibly quick and bold. They killed four men before you, or I could even

get our sights lined up on the other two.”

“I barely had time to realize what was happening,” Alexander admitted.

“They showed us how to stand up to evil—without hesitancy or fear. Afterward, they had no qualms about what we did. And I had no misgivings either. Because it was the only thing we could have done.”

“I suppose you’re right. My Ma told me there’s an old proverb that says a liar will steal, and a robber will kill.”

Rory nodded. “Aunt Artis is a wise woman.”

The lines of tension in Alexander’s face seemed to relax. “Thanks for talking to me about it.”

“Anytime. You can talk to me about anything.” The conversation went better than Rory could have hoped.

He took his hat off, leaned back against a tall pine, and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun’s rays on his face. But his moment of respite was short-lived. If he’d learned anything on this trip, it was to be ever vigilant when in the wilderness. Chastising himself for his carelessness, he straightened up and studied the area surrounding them.

“I was so keen on this trip before we left,” Alexander said. “I had no idea it would be this hard. It’s made me realize you were right about how dangerous and difficult it could be.”

“You were right too, about it being a chance to learn from Father and Bear,” Rory told him. “A moment ago, I realized I wasn’t keeping a watch out like they taught us.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. You can’t slack off out here. You can never let up being on your guard.”

Rory nodded as his eyes continued to survey the thick woods and copses of brush around them. “Danger can come out of nowhere. Like those robbers in the forest.”

“Indeed,” Alexander agreed, also glancing around.

Rory thought back on the skirmish. “That confrontation gave us a chance to see the fearless warrior in both our fathers. That was

really something.”

“We’ve both heard Uncle William tell tales of their heroic deeds, but to actually see them in action was astonishing.”

Rory nodded. “Good Lord, they were impressive. I’ll never forget it. You could tell that they’d trained and fought side by side for so many years, each knew what the other was going to do.”

“Maybe you and I will be like that someday,” Alexander said. He wiped Thunder’s sweaty back with a clump of grass, and the horse snorted with contentment. “You know, I have learned a lot on this journey. I didn’t realize how little I knew. Or what a greenhorn I was.”

Rory noted that Alexander’s arms and shoulders now pressed against the fabric of his buckskin shirt. And he appeared far more robust than when they began their journey. Perhaps tossing a heavy saddle over Thunder’s back several times a day and riding had strengthened his cousin.

“I think Father and Uncle Bear are holding up better than we are,” Rory said with a chuckle. He grabbed some grass to wipe Buck down too. His horse, a wise older gelding with nerves not shaken by anything, was holding up well too.

Perhaps there was a certain kind of strength that came with age.

“It seems like we’ve been traveling half our lives,” Alexander said. “I just want to stop moving for a while.”

“Besides visiting Uncle Stephen and his family, what do you think will happen when we finally get there? I’m hoping I’ll meet someone,” Rory confessed.

Alexander appeared surprised but nodded his agreement. “Aye, a pretty gal. I could go for that.”

They staked the four horses so they could all graze for a bit.

“Not just any pretty girl, but someone I feel I already know. Between us, I’ve been dreaming about her nearly every mile of this trip. I’ve even conjured up what she might look like.”

“Truly?”

Rory grinned as he thought about her. "She has long, silky, red hair, a face that's fair and morning fresh, lips the color of cherries, and eyes that see me as no one else ever has."

Alexander nodded. "She does sound perfect."

"For a long time now, I've fancied meeting someone who would make me as happy as Allison makes Little John. I want what my brother has. And I'd love to have a child of my own like their little Margaret. Being an uncle to her is great, but I want children of my own too. But it's hard to meet women when you live in the middle of nowhere. I'm hoping there will be one in Nacodocghes that will give me a second look. The one I've been imagining."

Alexander shook his head. "With your good looks, they'll only need one look."

"One look to decide I look like a wild turkey?" Rory asked.

They chuckled and then both startled as a rifle shot rang out in the forest where Father and Bear had gone.

At once, the boom of another rifle shot echoed toward Rory.
“Father’s rifle!” he cried.

Father and Bear wouldn’t be hunting because they just bought a good supply of jerky that morning, and they weren’t making camp here. They intended to rest the horses for only a short time.

Rory bounded toward his rifle and unsheathed it. “Something’s wrong. Grab your rifle.”

“It’s not loaded,” Alexander said in a panic. “I forgot to put fresh powder in it this morning.”

“Load it! Stay with the horses!” Rory yelled. Besides their lives, if there was one thing they couldn’t afford to lose, it was the horses.

He took off running toward where the shots came from.

God, keep Father and Bear safe, he prayed, as he ran.

As he drew close to where the shots came from, he slowed. And when an arrow split the air in front of his face, he dove behind the closest tree, his heart pounding.

“Father!” he yelled.

“It’s an ambush!” Father yelled.

“Indians intent on murder,” Bear called to him.

The two sounded fairly close by, and Rory peered out to study the area to see if he could safely reach them. But he snapped his head back behind the tree trunk when an arrow thudded into the bark less than a foot from his head. The arrow’s quivering sound made his heart shudder.

“Are you all right?” he called to them.

“Yes! Go back to Alexander,” Father called. “Protect the horses! That’s what they’re after.”

Rory understood why. Indians revered horses, even to the point of calling them God Dogs. Horse stealing between the tribes was considered a sport on the plains. And young warriors considered it an honorable way to gain experience and wealth.

“I want to help,” Rory yelled.

“You can by being sure they don’t get our horses,” Father said, his stern voice left no room for disagreement.

“We’ll be there soon,” Bear added. When a flurry of arrows sailed at them, his uncle shouted, “Go back now! Protect Alexander!” It was more of a plea than a directive.

Rory’s insides tore apart with indecision. He wanted to stay and help. But he also couldn’t leave Alexander and the horses alone much longer. He had no choice. His father and Bear had far more experience fighting Indians, and he knew he should do what they said. If he didn’t, there would be hell to pay later. When facing a threat, Father always became an army captain again, and he expected his orders to be obeyed without question.

Crouching low and making as little noise as possible, he cautiously wound his way through the pines and thick brush back to Alexander.

“What’s happening?” Alexander asked as soon as he approached.

“Stay down and keep your voice low. It’s Indians!” Rory whispered. He took cover near the horses, behind a huge pine with a trunk at least three feet thick.

Alexander’s eyes widened, and his face paled at the prospect of impending doom. Visibly terrified, his features distorted with horror. “What tribe?” his cousin asked with a shaky voice.

“Not sure, I couldn’t see them. It may be Osage.”

Alexander raced over to the same pine tree and stood next to Rory. “I hope it’s not Osage. They cut your head off!”

“Maybe they’re Wichita,” Rory said, keeping his voice low. “Father said this was the area they sometimes hunt in.”

“God, help us!” Alexander said. “They’re bloody fierce too. Remember the story we heard about the Wichita raiding a Tonkawa village and killing thirty, including women, children, and old men.”

Rory grabbed ahold of his cousin’s shoulder and shook it. “Alexander, we are not women, children, and old men. We are well-armed Kentuckians. Find your courage, man.”

Alexander blew out a breath and looked him in the eye. “You’re right. I was reacting like a boy rather than a man.”

Rory gave him a firm nod and focused on the woods again.

In addition to attacks on settlers, Father had recently explained to all of them that there were often intertribal conflicts with Indians attacking Indians. Settlers were sometimes caught in the crossfire.

But dangers in Texas didn’t end there. Newspapers were full of accounts of Mexican thieves and smugglers regularly attacking both Mexicans and settlers. A party of Mexican drovers en route to Louisiana was recently attacked by a gang of Mexican thieves. The settlers who tried to help them were also killed.

Father’s point was that you didn’t know who you could trust in Texas—or anywhere else for that matter. Anglos, Indians, and Mexicans, all had bad elements. Unfortunately, members of each race tended to hold the entire race responsible for the misdeeds of a few. And retaliations were often inflicted on entirely innocent people.

“Are your rifle and pistols loaded?” Rory asked.

Alexander nodded. “Checked them twice.”

“Good. Our job is to protect the horses.”

Their heads swiveled toward the sound of more rifle shots followed by reports from pistols. His father and Bear must be alternately shooting while the other loaded.

Each shot grabbed at his heart and made it tighten with worry.

Unable to help, as he listened to round after round of gunfire, he felt powerless and uncertain. Every gunshot they heard made a piercing doubt assail him. His mind bled one question after another.

Did he make a terrible mistake by coming back to Alexander?

How long could Father and Bear hold out?

How long before the braves moved in more aggressively?

Sam prayed that Rory made it back to Alexander. At least with the two of them together, they stood a better chance of making it out of this if Indians were approaching them too. He wanted to go back to them but feared doing that would expose Rory and Alexander to even more danger. They were better off making their stand here.

Bear leaned closer. "I'm growin' tired of bein' pinned down like a wee frightened rabbit," he complained in a low husky tone. "And I'm worried about our lads."

"Me too. We need to get back to our boys, and soon before this or another band circles around behind them. Sitting here, we're just using up powder while those Indians are using up arrows." At least a couple dozen arrows pinpricked the trees they hid behind. Many more stuck up from the pine needles that covered the forest floor around them. "My guess is there's five of them based on where the arrows have been coming from."

"Nay, four. I shot one," Bear said with a hint of boastfulness.

"I'm going to make my way to the right. You go left. When you hear my rifle shot, fire into them with your rifle. Then we'll rush them with our pistols."

"And then, if need be, we'll use knives and hatchets. I ken what we need to do."

"Be careful, Bear. We've come too far together to not grow old together."

Bear nodded, and the fire of battle lit his eyes. "Aye, Sam."

In years past, that same light lit Bear's eyes when they'd been threatened. It was something deep within him that Bear could summon when he needed the strength to get through difficult, sometimes impossible, times. Times when being strong was the only choice they had.

Sam drew on his own inner strength, knowing he would need every bit of it if they were to all live through this. He turned and crawled behind the brush to his right. When it was safe, he knelt and quietly scampered toward the spot that would put him beside the Indians instead of in front of them. With the stealth of a hunting mountain lion, he kept a close eye on where he stepped and branches that might snap back on him.

He knew Bear, even though he was a big man, could make it to the left side of the Indians' position without being detected. In the mountains of New Hampshire, Bear grew up hunting bears, wolves, and other large prey, for farmers who worried about the beasts killing their cattle or children. For a time, he'd done the same in Kentucky. Although Sam would never admit it, Bear was still the best and slyest hunter in the family.

Sam's instincts told him he was close even before his eyes did. And his eyes told him they were Wichita, based on the descriptions he heard from other travelers, trappers, and scouts along the way. The four braves wore breechcloths with leather leggings to protect their legs. They also wore earrings and moccasins and cut their hair in the Mohawk style. They were darker, shorter, and stockier than other Indians, and tattooed dots, lines, and circles covered their faces and bodies. The Wichita were sometimes called the raccoon people because of the tattooing around their eyes.

He could tell he and Bear were still undetected because the braves were firing their arrows at the spot they had just occupied. He gave Bear another minute to make sure he had time to make it to his position on the other side.

Then he precisely lined up his sights on the brave closest to him. With a gentle squeeze of the trigger, the longrifle boomed,

and the brave dropped.

A second shot roared from Bear's rifle, and another brave died as the lead exploded into the Indian's skull.

At once, Sam dropped the rifle and attacked with savage fierceness. With his pistols drawn, he rushed toward the two remaining braves. Knowing Bear would take care of the other Indian, he fired both weapons into one brave.

At the same time, the brave raised his bow and let an arrow loose. Time stood still as the deadly shaft shot toward him.

Sam felt the arrow slice through the buckskin on his left arm.

With a cry that echoed through the woods like the wail of a ferocious beast, Bear charged. His face savage and snarling teeth bared, he fired his two pistols into the last brave. Then, clutching his hatchet with a ruthless intensity, Bear hurried toward Sam.

Sam's muscle burned like fire, and warm blood ran down his arm. He yanked out his longknife and came forward too, the heat of battle still burning through his veins.

Cautiously, knowing a brave with enough life left in him might draw his knife and attack, they studied the bodies.

One brave, limp and quivering in pain, still clung to the edge of life.

"He still lives," Bear said.

Stone-faced, the tattooed brave stared up at them.

"He's losing blood fast," Sam said.

"So are ye," Bear said, with a nod at the blood dripping off the fingers of Sam's left hand.

"It's just a scratch. I'll let you wrap it in a minute."

"Nay, I'll wrap it now," Bear said. He stuck his hatchet in his belt and untied the kerchief around his neck.

Sam winced and gritted his teeth as Bear tied the cloth tightly around his upper arm.

Then he sheathed his knife, knowing Bear was still armed and knelt beside the dying brave. He gazed upon the man—one warrior to another. He respected Indian warriors. As a member of the

militia, he'd encountered many in his lifetime in countless small battles from Nova Scotia to the Hudson River to the hills of Kentucky. They were typically proud and fearless fighters. It was that pride and courage he respected—not the ruthless brutality they were capable of inflicting.

Sam knew Indian sign language and found it particularly useful because it was the same language used across the entire country. He would give the dying brave the sign of respect for a warrior. First, he made the sign of strong; holding his right fist above his left, he struck over and downwards with a twisting motion. Then he made the sign for brave; striking downwards with his right fist next to the knuckles of his left hand.

The brave's eyes brightened and then faded as he took his last earthly breath.

Anxious to complete their journey, they put in three long days riding late into the night under the bright moonlight and starlight. Rory wasn't sure which was bigger—the sky above them or the land ahead of them that seemed to go on forever.

They loped and cantered mile after mile past herds of buffalo, wild cattle, and grazing deer. The wild game often stared at the passing horsemen before resuming their foraging.

The sight that truly captured Rory's heart was a vast herd of mustangs. The wild horses were certainly the greatest curiosity that they saw upon the prairies of Texas. The herd contained horses of exceeding beauty in many colors. At first sight of the herd, that must have contained hundreds, they stared in amazement and contemplated the noble animal. When the mustangs became aware of their presence, they loped over the earth with a sense of freedom and seemed to dare them to give chase.

"Where did they all come from?" Rory asked Father.

"From the Spaniards. Of all that the Spaniards left to mark their reign in Texas, there is none more laudable than their horse."

"What makes them so special," Alexander asked.

Father turned to Alexander. "I've read that their endurance makes them the horse of choice for most frontiersmen."

"As big as Texas is, 'tis no wonder endurance is a favored trait," Uncle Bear said. "I bet ye could fit Scotland into Texas na less than six times."

Sometimes they would also ride past meager log homesteads that made Rory wonder how they would survive in winter or who would protect them from outlaws or Indians. The Province was far too vast for any system of law, so each man had to depend upon himself. He suspected that every cabin kept a rifle and pistol for each person old enough to bear them. Every man and most women were forced to become skilled in weapons because they knew that the only defense among men was that of weapons.

The settlers would wave, and they would wave back or stop only briefly to water themselves and the horses, knowing the family probably had little food and could ill afford to feed strangers.

At last, as the sun beamed down directly over their dusty heads, they caught sight of the town of Nacogdoches. It was not only within sight, it was within reach.

As they rode toward the settlement, Father explained that the main road into the town, the El Camino Real connected Mexico City with Nacogdoches and the town's sister city, Natchitoches in nearby Louisiana.

They soon began to pass a few of the homes and buildings on the outskirts of town and then the town filled in. On the town's western side, they saw a massive two-story stone structure that was about seventy feet long. Connected to the building was what had to be the Mexican army's fortress because tall, sturdy palisades rose up on either side of a massive gate. From a distance, Rory could see dozens of soldiers within the fort's grounds. Normally, he found the presence of the military reassuring, but the sight of these soldiers in their foreign uniforms made uneasiness erupt within him. He had to remind himself that he was the foreigner here.

But as he glanced around the town, he saw far more Americans than Mexicans.

As settlers like these from the States moved westward, new towns typically sprouted saloons first, then inns, liveries, and an assortment of stores. As they passed several drinking

establishments, a large inn under construction, and numerous storefronts, Rory noted that Nacogdoches was no exception.

In the midst of these in the center of town stood a recently painted white building. The four of them pulled up on their reins in front of the new-looking sign on the outside of the building which read, 'Dr. Jason Grant – Clinic & Apothecary.' Rory was certain that Baldy's arrival in town had been well received. Having a local practicing physician meant that you lived in a thriving town.

"I'm eager to see Baldy again," Father said. "He's one of the finest men I've ever known. And his wife Melly is one of the strongest and kindest women I've ever met."

"How will we find Uncle Stephen?" Alexander asked. "I wonder how far away he lives. I hope it's not too far."

Rory shook his head. How far? After all the miles they'd covered, Alexander fretted about a few more miles?

"Baldy will know where Stephen and his family live," Father said. He winced and grabbed at his still sore arm as he dismounted.

"Aye, he'll know," Uncle Bear agreed. "And he can give ye some healin' salve for yer arm, Sam."

After Father received the arrowhead wound, Bear had given it a thorough washing with whiskey and then applied the salve he brought with them. Father's arm seemed to be healing well, although it still pained him some, especially when mounting and dismounting his stallion.

Rory barely remembered Dr. Grant, called Baldy by family, and his wife, Melly. Most of the time that the two were in Kentucky, he was away at school in Lexington. And he'd only been eleven-years-old when they left with Uncle Stephen. Alexander was even younger, somewhere around seven.

Rory could sense the excitement building in both his father and Bear as they all tied their horses. The smiles on the two reflected the joy they all felt at having finally arrived after all the miles they had covered.

A sense of relief and accomplishment filled Rory in equal measures. And a sense of anticipation. And hope. Was she here?

He glanced around the busy town, his gaze already taking in every young woman he saw. His eyes widened. Across the street, one took his breath away. He caught only the briefest glimpse of her face, but he knew at once that it was her.

The woman he came to find.

She was even more beautiful in person than she had been in his mind. Her long, curly red hair and slim hips swished from side to side as she marched down the street, away from Rory, with a determined stride as though nothing could stop her.

But it looked as though someone was trying to. A well-dressed young man about Rory's age followed close behind her. He seemed to be arguing with her.

A lover's quarrel? He hoped he was wrong and that she didn't have a suitor because that particular young lady was someone he would like to become acquainted with. Somehow he would find out who she was.

"Are you coming?" Alexander asked, rousing Rory from his fascination with the young beauty.

"Yes, I'm coming," he said with one last glance toward her.

They entered together, and a bookish-looking young man of perhaps seventeen greeted them from behind a counter. "Goodday, Sirs. I'm Adam Pate, Dr. Grant's assistant. How may we help you, gentlemen? Is one of you sick? Or do you just need something from the apothecary?"

Behind Adam's counter, Rory could see orderly shelves with labeled jars that held familiar substances to treat common illnesses. Mustard for chest congestion, laudanum for pain and earache, cherry bark for cough, elderberry for fever, and peppermint for stomach ache, among many others.

Father spoke first. "Is Baldy, I mean Dr. Grant, in?"

"Yes, let me get him for you," Adam said. "May I tell him your names?"

“Nay,” Bear said. “We’d prefer to surprise him.”

“And Melly, I mean Mrs. Grant, too if she’s here,” Father said.

While they waited for Baldy and Melly, Father paced back and forth and Bear kept looking out the window. Rory wondered if his uncle was perhaps looking for his brother, although the chances of glimpsing Stephen were slim in a town as bustling and spread out as Nacogdoches.

A middle-aged man stepped out that Rory recognized as Dr. Grant even though he hadn’t seen him in years. The doctor’s brown eyes widened and a wide smile curved across his still ruggedly handsome face. He shook his shiny bald head as though he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Is it really you?” Baldy said as he rushed forward and embraced Father first and then Bear. “Good heavens, it really is you,” he said, looking up at Bear. “No one but Bear MacKay can hug like that!”

Rory wasn’t surprised to hear Baldy swear. It was a trait his father had told him about when he asked what the doctor was like. Apparently, he’d picked up the habit as an army surgeon, long before he became a preacher. And Baldy sometimes enjoyed whiskey and gambling at cards, what he called his ‘flaws and weaknesses.’

“Aye, ‘twas a long way ye made me come for that hug,” Bear told Baldy with a grin.

“We decided it had been far too long since we’d seen Stephen, you, and Melly,” Father said. “I’m glad to see you looking so well.”

“We are,” Baldy said. “Did you meet our son, Adam?”

They all shook Adam’s hand, and then Baldy said, “Adam, go find your mother.”

“Yes, Sir,” Adam said and hurried to the back of the building.

“I still can’t believe what I’m seeing,” Baldy said, shaking his head. “What on God’s earth inspired you to take such a long, dangerous journey?”

“Old age,” Bear said. “We told it ‘na yet’.”

“And youth,” Father said with a glance at Rory and Alexander. “These two needed some time in the saddle.”

“Sam!” a still beautiful middle-aged woman cried as she joined them. “And Bear! What a wonderful surprise!” Smiling broadly, she hugged both Father and Uncle Bear. “We’ve missed you two and Catherine and Artis so much.”

“I assume these are your sons?” Baldy asked. “You two were just little boys when we left. Now you’re both men and big sturdy ones at that.”

“Aye,” Bear said with a good deal of pride. “My son, Alexander, and my nephew, Rory.”

Mrs. Grant placed a hand on Rory’s shoulder. “Thank the good Lord you four have all arrived safely.”

Baldy said, “Are you ready to celebrate your arrival with my best whiskey?”

“Aye!” Bear answered at once. “I had to use what I bought for the wounds on Alexander’s neck and Sam’s arm.”

At once, Baldy examined both wounds. “You did a good job dressing both wounds,” the doctor said. “They’re healing well, but Sam’s arm could use a clean dressing. Adam, get some of your honey salve and Melly if you’d get me a roll of boiled bandages, I’ll doctor this in no time. Then we’ll have that whiskey with Bear.”

“No,” Father countered, shaking his head. “Let’s wait on the whiskey until Stephen can join us. We’ve waited this long. We can wait a little while longer.”

Bear started to object, but then just expressed his dissatisfaction with a grunting harrumph.

“Baldy, could you take us to Stephen’s place?” Father asked. “I’m anxious to see him.”

“Of course. Melly, can you and Adam take care of things here?”

Mrs. Grant smiled warmly at her husband. “Certainly. Go. Have a joyous reunion and we’ll see you tomorrow morning sometime. You won’t want to ride back after celebrating with all of them.”

“You know me so well, Melly.”

After Baldy doctored Father's arm, they left the clinic and headed toward the livery where Baldy kept his horse. After he quickly saddled the gelding, they were off, galloping at a good clip toward the east.

"How far is it?" Alexander asked.

Rory started laughing so hard he nearly choked.

"What's so funny?" Baldy called to Rory.

"I thought we were done with that question," Rory said. "He's asked that question no less than a thousand times on our trip."

"I just like knowing where I am," Alexander said.

Baldy slowed his horse to a comfortable trot and pulled up next to Alexander. "Wyllie Cattle and Horse Company is about ten miles southeast between Nacogdoches and the settlement of Chireno. Spanish pioneers first settled the land received as grants from the Spanish government. When Stephen's son, Steve, married Rebecca Tyler, her father gifted them ten-thousand acres as a wedding present."

Rory, who rode on the other side of Baldy, said, "That was mighty generous."

"Indeed," Baldy said. "After we all came to Nacogdoches, they were having great difficulty procuring a land grant from the former corrupt Alcalde. Mr. Tyler's gift allowed Stephen and his three sons, Samuel, Thomas, and Steve, along with their wives, to start their cattle and horse company. The property already had two abandoned houses on it, what the Spanish called *casas fuertes* or fortified houses. Thomas and Abigail live in one. And Samuel, Louisa, and their baby boy live in the other. Stephen wanted to be close to his grandson, so he lives in that casa too."

"What about Steve and his wife Rebecca?" Rory asked. "Where do they live?"

"They're living with the Tylers for now. It's a fine, large home, and they have the entire upstairs to themselves," Baldy answered.

They rode on in silence, alternating the horses' pace between a canter and a trot. Rory studied the landscape as they rode. The

untamed wilderness surrounding them loomed larger than life with a breathtaking view alongside every mile.

When Baldy took his horse to a gallop, Rory knew they were nearing his uncle's and cousins' places.

At long, long, last, they were here.

They soon turned into a stunning place with huge oaks and rolling green pastures. Rory could see a large herd of cattle grazing in the distance. The two homes, separated by about fifty yards, looked to be sturdy with thick walls made of stone and logs plastered with mud. And each had a rock hearth.

"I can't wait to see Stephen's face when he sees you," Baldy said as he stepped off his gelding and they all tied their horses to the rail on the right front side of the house.

The front door opened, and a man stepped out. Rory knew at once that it was his uncle. He possessed the characteristic broad-shouldered strength of a Wyllie, had raven black hair with only a little gray at his temples, and crystal blue eyes. Eyes that became saucer-like at the sight of his brothers and then instantly filled with tears of happiness. He wept openly as he repeatedly hugged his brothers. Then the three of them were hugging as a group and patting each other on the back. The heartwarming sight made Rory swallow a lump in his throat.

"You are an answered prayer," Stephen said with a breaking voice, as he finally stepped back and then swiped at the tears on his rugged face. "Why are you here? Is everyone all right? William? Edward?"

"They're fine, and so are their families. We just missed ye!" Bear said. "And we got plum tired of waitin' for ye to show up in Kentucky."

"Na," Father said with a sideways grin. "We just wanted to see

what Texas looked like.”

Stephen’s smile widened, and then he glanced at Rory and Alexander. “Rory,” his uncle said and held out his hand to shake his. Then he shook Alexander’s hand. “Luckily, you both have your mothers’ good looks.”

They all chuckled at the good-natured ribbing. Then they followed Stephen inside and took seats in the well-furnished main room. Alexander sat down next to Rory.

“I still can’t believe you’re here. How on earth did you talk Artis and Catherine into letting you go?” Stephen asked his brothers. A smile remained on his handsome face.

“They’re on an extended trip to Boston,” Father said. “Catherine’s mother passed, and she needed to settle her estate. As I’m sure you remember, her mother had considerable wealth and vast properties both in the United States and in England. So she knew it would take several months to take care of it all.”

“And Artis went with her?” Stephen asked.

“Aye,” Bear said. “And my son Daniel and his wife Ann; and my daughters, Rebecca and Julianne. Rebecca is now eighteen, and Julianne is sixteen. Both wanted to go to Boston with their mother and aunt to buy new gowns and cloaks.”

Father grinned and said, “When they left for Boston, Catherine and Artis didn’t know we were going. But they’ve probably received our letter by now. We figured their absence gave us a good excuse to teach these boys a thing or two. And Bear and I wanted another adventure before we grew too old to enjoy one.”

Stephen nodded. “I’m the youngest brother, and I’m already feeling my age. Some days more than others.”

Rory doubted that the man’s strength had diminished much if at all. Here was a seasoned frontier cowman of commanding presence. A man who embodied the strength and grit of the American West. He could see it in the sun burnished color of his face and the hardness of his jaw. He saw it in his uncle’s muscled and calloused hands. And he heard it in his voice, penetrating and

sharp at the edges. But most of all, he saw it in his eyes—eyes that reflected a keen moral strength.

“It’s good to see you again, Uncle,” Rory said. “I remember being terribly sad when you left.”

Uncle Stephen nodded. “That parting was difficult for all of us.”

“Are our cousins around?” Alexander asked.

“All three of them are out branding some of our young heifers,” Stephen said. “They’ll be in soon, and then we’ll do some real celebrating. How about some coffee for now? Samuel’s wife, Louisa, makes a superb pot of coffee.”

“Aye, if ye have a wee bit of whiskey to splash in it,” Bear said with a throaty chuckle.

When Samuel’s wife came into the room carrying her baby boy, they stood and made introductions. Louisa was a petite, exceptionally lovely, blonde. She seemed as charming as she was beautiful and welcomed them into her home with warmth and kindness. Rory could understand why Samuel had married her.

As they drank coffee, Rory glanced around at the home’s comfortable furnishings and decorations, which were mostly practical items like coat and hat racks, oil lamps, and candleholders. Someday, he wanted to have a home such as this to share with a beautiful wife and children. He glanced over at Alexander, wondering if he was having the same thought, as he too surveyed the large main room.

“Don’t worry, they’ll be room for all of you,” Uncle Stephen said. “We have several guest rooms, although they are quite small. At least you’ll have some privacy and a roof over your heads.”

Rory told him, “I just need a place to stretch out these long legs. After eight-hundred miles, I believe I’m in danger of becoming permanently bow-legged.”

Alexander laughed. “And I’ll be duck-footed for the rest of my life.”

Uncle Stephen took his infant grandson, a stout, long fellow, from Louisa so she could pour more coffee. The baby, named

Stephen after his grandfather, seemed perfectly content when being held by his Grandpa.

The first of their family to be born here, Rory wondered if the baby's future would be here in Mexican Texas.

"Thank you kindly, Uncle," Rory said. "I'll stay here tonight, but I plan to go back into town with Baldy in the morning. I'll stay at the inn or a boarding house. Just for a couple of nights. I want to see the town, get a real bath, and then just sleep."

"He wants to meet a girl," Alexander informed them with a knowing nod of his head.

Four amused gazes turned to Rory, and he gave Alexander a kick in the shin.

Uncle Stephen chuckled. "I would have done the same thing at your age. But we will expect you back by Sunday morning, in three days."

"That's when I give the family my weekly sermon," Baldy said. "Mexico prohibits any worship except the Catholic faith, so we only gather to worship as a family. Mostly we just eat. We have a big picnic outside and eat till we're all porky."

"I wouldn't want to miss that," Rory said.

"Me either," Alexander said. "We'll both be back by then."

Rory frowned. "I didn't invite you along."

"Hey, I might be on the lookout for a girl too."

"Nay, ye're too young Alexander," Bear said. "Yer Ma would tell ye the same."

"Well, someone has to keep Rory out of trouble," Alexander said.

"I'd be grateful to you, Alexander, if you kept an eye on him for me," Father told him. "Two are always stronger than one," he said with a toast of his cup toward Bear.

"Aye," Bear agreed. "Wait till we tell ye, Stephen, about our journey."

"I can hardly wait to hear all about it from beginning to end," Uncle Stephen said.

“You’ll want to hear about it too, Baldy,” Father added.

“We have all night,” Baldy said. “I’m not going back into town until tomorrow morning.”

Uncle Stephen turned to Rory and Alexander. “Your three cousins should finish branding soon. Thomas always goes straight home to his wife, Abigail, at his house, so you’ll have to wait until later to see him. Steve comes in to say goodbye before he leaves to go back to his wife in town. And Samuel comes here, of course.”

“We’re anxious to see all three,” Rory said. “We were all young boys the last time we were together.”

They had so much catching up to do that over the course of the evening the seven of them managed to consume several bottles of whiskey, first in front of the unlit hearth and later on the home’s spacious veranda to enjoy the cool evening air.

For the last several hours, Rory and Alexander had listened to Father and Bear regale Uncle Stephen, cousin Samuel, and Baldy with tales of their journey, especially the river crossings, robbers, and the Indian attack.

Then Samuel told them about the terrible flood that destroyed the homeplace they’d worked on for six years and the difficulty they’d encountered when they’d tried to obtain a grant for land near Nacogdoches. “The previous Alcalde was a corrupt and vile man who did little more than enrich his own pockets,” Samuel said.

Rory sensed that Samuel, who was three years older than he was, was a two-fisted, iron-willed man who didn’t tolerate fools or dishonest bureaucrats.

“Our move was hardest on Louisa,” Samuel said. “With Baldy and Melly’s help, she had to deliver our son on the road from Pecan Point to here.”

Louisa, no doubt worn out from cooking the fine meal she

served earlier, had taken the baby and retired hours ago.

The conversation soon turned to Texas' future.

"I predict that Texas will be the stubbornest of all our country's frontiers," Stephen said. "She won't settle down easy. Between Indians that chop off heads or take your scalp, weather than can just as easily make you die of thirst or drown you, and men that are more like two-legged cactus than civilized Americans, Texas will remain an intractable wilderness."

"I'm not sure about that. No new territory has ever been settled by such spirited and cantankerous people as those who have settled here in this Province," Samuel said.

"Nay," Bear said. "Kentucky's early settlers were high-spirited fighters, and that includes yer father, me, and Sam."

"Ye had to be fighters," Alexander said. "To survive."

"And we will have to be again," Uncle Stephen said. "Eventually, Texas will be taken from Mexico."

"And taken by force," Samuel said. "If threatened, Texians will fight for their land and their freedoms."

"What is the difference between a Texian and a Tejano?" Rory asked.

"Texians are recent arrivals from the United States. Tejanos are residents of Spanish or Mexican descent."

Father looked thoughtful. "If ever there was a land to be won, here is a mighty one."

"Will Texians demand a government of their own?" Rory asked. "Is the Mexican government so onerous?"

Samuel leaned forward as he answered, "First the Spanish and then the Mexican authorities have allowed settlement with no clear titles to land, so there's a good deal of confusion about property. Also, the Mexican government is far-off and inefficient, and their laws are not justly applied to Americans."

"Texians will want real law, a law of American rights and justice," Uncle Stephen said.

"And they require conversion to Catholicism," Baldy said.

“Which we ignore.”

“So, Rory and Alexander, what did you learn on your journey?” Uncle Stephen asked.

“Age and wisdom will always beat youth and exuberance,” Rory answered without hesitation.

His uncles all chuckled.

“Aye,” Bear agreed. “But ye both grew older and wiser on our long journey.” His uncle glanced proudly at Alexander.

But Alexander’s unfocused eyes didn’t seem to notice. He looked as ready for sleep as Rory was.

“Humph,” Bear said with a grin. “It appears age can outdrink youth as well.”

Rory couldn’t stifle his yawn, and his eyes felt like sand floated around in them. Worn out from their journey and the excitement of their arrival, the big meal, the whiskey, and the yarns had all made him grow sleepy.

“I think it’s time we let my cousins get some rest,” Samuel said and stood. “I’ll show you where you can sleep.”

Uncle Stephen turned to Baldy. “Can you take Rory and Alexander back to Nacogdoches in the morning and then bring them back here on Sunday?”

“Of course, if they don’t mind leaving early. I need to get back to my patients. In a town like ours, with so many people coming and going, on their way to the states or going further into the province, there’s no end to people needing medical help.”

“We’re used to being up early,” Rory told him. “Father made sure we saw every sunrise on our journey.”

Near the Sabine River

Andrew Astley supposed he lived not only outside the law but way beyond the law.

This far north, there was almost no law. Spain's laws no longer applied in the newborn Mexican country. Only the fledgling Mexican Army was charged with enforcing the law and then only in remote towns like San Antonio and Gonzales. Even in nearby Nacodocghes, the ineffectual Mexican military did little to carry out the law. In part because the muddy waters of the Mexican government were constantly changing.

It was an ambitious thief's paradise. A paradise for men suited to the frontier. Hell for those that weren't.

He and his men preyed on those that weren't.

He had done so ever since the Battle of New Orleans in January of 1815 when he slipped away from his duties in the British Army. Shortly before the battle ended, he'd done what any intelligent man would do. He ran. He ran to the rear when he was needed at the front. Across a carpet of crumpled bleeding bodies. Across those who weren't as smart as he was.

He hadn't wanted to join the military, but as the third son of an English noble, he had few prospects in life except the military. Soon after he joined up, British forces were sent to fight for a valuable prize—New Orleans—a vital seaport considered the gateway to America's newly purchased territory in the West.

Despite the large British advantage in numbers, training, and experience, America's ramshackle army defeated his commander's poorly executed assault in a half hour. The Americans had roughly three-hundred casualties, while the British suffered near two-thousand. It was another embarrassing loss to the damn Americans, the 'dirty shirts,' as he and other Brits called them.

He'd made his way westward, and after stealing a horse, he'd galloped into what was then part of the Spanish Empire. Now it was Mexican Texas or Coahuila y Tejas as the Mexicans called it.

Ever since deserting that battle line, he'd blurred another line—the line between good and evil. It was a worthless line anyway. Because the world wasn't black and white, sinful or righteous, victors or losers. It was everything in between. Like the heavy fog that rolled in and covered his escape that night, life was murky. Lacking clarity even on the brightest of days.

Over the last nine years, he'd become the top dog over an assortment of mongrel outlaws, mostly criminals and other deserters. And like stray dogs, his Mexican, Indian, and anglo compañeros roamed freely in the vastness of Texas. Snarling, barking, biting at anything weak.

As the only one with a proper education, formal military training, and a physically imposing six-foot stature, he was their natural leader. His followers were coarse men who possessed baser skills. Mainly looting, rape, and murder. They wanted power and money, and that often resulted in jealousy, mistrust, and machismo.

When their shootings and killings became more frequent, they soon earned a name worthy of them—Tejano Devils. Around their nightly campfires, they celebrated their acts of violence and thievery.

The meanest of his bunch were Felipe and Jose, sons of a Mexican father and Indian mother. Embittered by not feeling a part of either race, they seemed to have gotten the cruelest part of both their parents. The two were valuable, though. They were his

connection to the Comanches. And so, like today, he often let them be the first to have the women they captured.

While his other men rounded up the couple's horses and cattle to sell, he strode toward the house to see what the two had found inside the meager dwelling. A dead dog lay on the porch. Shameful, but it didn't surprise him.

Astley ambled through the open front door.

"Kill her when you finish with her," Felipe told Jose as he stood and yanked up his pants. He wiped his horseshoe-shaped mustache.

"Si," Jose said. He bent down, intending to also rape the woman whose hands were tied above her head.

The young woman's face would have been comely had it not been so twisted in terror. Her whimpers, a wretched mix of grief and fear, made Astley pity her. Her husband's mutilated corpse lay nearby bleeding into the cabin's dirt floor.

He reached down and jerked Jose up by his long, greasy hair. "No, leave her. We've taken enough."

Astley slid a knife through the rope wound around the woman's tied hands. At least that way, the bereaved woman could bury her husband.

She stared at him with tear-filled widened eyes, a violet-blue that reminded him of a woman he once thought he loved. Long ago and far away.

"Let's go!" he ordered. "The others await."

Jose frowned and started to object but thought better of it after a hard glance from him.

Felipe snatched up a silver candlestick on his way out. "For my Madre."

Jose buttoned his pants and strode toward the door. Not to be outdone by his brother, he seized a pewter platter. It had likely been a wedding gift to the young couple. Now the candlestick and platter would be presents for an old Indian woman.

Astley followed the two outside and shut the door to the cabin.

Why would young settlers build a home in such a remote area? And just the two of them? They were like lambs waiting to be slaughtered. Easy targets for desperadoes like his men. If his gang hadn't gotten to them first, Indians might have. And that would have been far worse, at least for the man. The fellow would likely have been tortured before he died.

He didn't allow his men to torture their victims. They were devils, not monsters.

When his gang had gathered together again, Astley mounted his horse and told them, "Willis and Jess, I want you to sell those cattle at the auction in San Augustine."

The two men nodded.

"Felipe and Jose, sell those horses at the auction in Nacogdoches. Then the four of you meet us at our usual campsite west of Nacogdoches. I have business near the town."

He employed two spies in the town who were constantly on the lookout for illicit trade deals. And this deal promised to yield him the rest of the wealth he needed to get him back to England where he could live out his life in a comfortable manor house.

Nine years of hard living and a black beard would provide him with the needed disguise. Although he remained clean-shaven now, he would let his beard grow on the journey across the Gulf and then the Atlantic. And when he bought passage to the West Indies from his pirate friends in Galveston, he would change his name to something even more aristocratic. Then he would book passage on a cargo ship bringing sugar, molasses, and fruit from the West Indies to Great Britain.

Perhaps he would find a wife in England who would come to his bed willingly and cheerfully, unlike the many bad-tempered shrews he'd found in Texas when it suited him. Or maybe the pirates would have a woman captive that would suit him.

He was looking forward to going to Galveston. The village contained not only shanties for pirates, but also a large slave market, boarding houses for visiting buyers, a shipyard, saloons,

pool halls, gambling houses, and Maison Rouge, the mansion Lafitte built.

“Diablo, what business do you have in Nacodocghes?” Joe asked, addressing him by the name his men had dubbed him.

The nickname always made him smile. “Rifles and whiskey. For our Comanche friends,” he said. “Felipe and Jose told us Chief Yzazona wants more rifles so they can conduct more raids and steal more horses.”

“Si,” Felipe said. “Yzazona has many braves in Comanchera, but few rifles. He has gold. Some from his San Saba gold mine and some from the Llano. He has also stolen from the Spanish who traveled northward from Mexico City.”

Astley cocked his head to the side. “Well, I may have found the Chief many rifles—contraband stolen in Louisiana.”

“Chief Yzazona will be pleased,” Jose said as he tied two of the four stolen horses to the back of his mount. The other two were already tied to Felipe’s mount.

“Jose,” Astley said, “leave one horse for the woman.”

His men looked from one to another, but no one voiced an objection to his rare act of mercy. They knew better than to dispute him or challenge him for leadership of the gang. The last man who did was no longer a man when he arrived in hell. He shot the cojones off his would-be rival and watched as the man bled to death.

Carlos stared at him with narrow, dark eyes that burned with greed. “What do we get?” His voice held his usual note of suspicion.

Always the same question from the man. No matter how often Astley equally shared their earnings with his men. Carlos would always look out for Carlos. He’d had enough of the cock’s insolence. And he didn’t trust the man.

“Do not worry, Carlos. You will get what you deserve,” Astley told him. He withdrew one of his two flintlock pistols and shot the man in the forehead.

This morning, Jessica's father insisted that she take a day off from work. She'd put in many long hours recently helping customers and creating displays. She had to admit when she finally went to bed last night, her legs ached, and her feet burned from being on them so much lately. So she reluctantly agreed to spend the day resting.

Gazing out her window at her town and the countryside beyond it, Jessica's heart yearned for something. She wasn't quite sure what, but she knew it made a strange little ache deep in her heart. She wondered once again if it might be the big family she craved. Or perhaps she longed to be loved by someone other than her father and best friend.

With a sigh, she decided to read for a while. With her stockinged feet propped up on a footstool, she sat alone in her room, trying to read *The Chestnut Tree*, a long poem that presented sketches of those who passed beneath a two-hundred-year-old chestnut tree. She bought the book recently because she wondered if she might someday write something similar about the town's huge and very old oak—the one under which Rebecca and Steve were married. Certainly, the tree would witness many changes in Texas, and an untold number of colorful characters would pass beneath its far-reaching branches.

Although she took great pleasure in reading, today she couldn't concentrate. Her room and the silence were closing in on her.

Perhaps it was because she'd slept poorly. For most of the

night, anxious thoughts flashed through her mind as she fretted about what Donny would do next. Yesterday he had followed her through town on her way to and from the lady who supplied their fresh eggs for the store. She'd walked so fast trying to get away from him, she'd broken several eggs, and the sticky goo had dripped out of the basket and onto her skirt.

She tossed the book onto the desk and started pacing, trying to calm her overwrought nerves. After a few minutes, she decided it wasn't helping, and she certainly wasn't resting. At this rate, she would only wear a hole in her carpet and blisters on her feet before she settled down.

What was she going to do? She couldn't stay here locked in her bedroom, tense and afraid to leave. Afraid to visit Rebecca. The world was out there. Her world. She wanted her life back the way it was before. She was normally calm, not edgy, and high-strung.

But the wretched man wasn't going to leave her alone. Like a louse, he had infested her life. He was out there, just waiting to pounce on her again. The thought made a distressing shiver shoot straight to her skittish soul.

After her father's attempt to stop Donny, he'd only agreed to leave her alone for now. But already he was following her again.

Steve and his father had made sure Donny knew his ungentlemanly behavior wasn't appreciated and wouldn't be tolerated. But what could they do really? They had their cattle and horse operation to run.

It was time to put an end to this. Come what may, she would end this today. She couldn't rely on someone else to end it for her. She had to. Somehow, someway, she would make him stop. Still, something made her hesitate. Was it her instincts warning her of danger? Although this wasn't a life and death situation, she sensed a threat. She didn't feel safe anymore.

Before she could even take another breath, she startled, alarmed by the knock on the door. "Who is it?" she called out. Her heart thudded, afraid it was Donny.

"It's Jack. A package was just left for you." Jack was one of Harrison's young store clerks.

Jessica opened the door and took the package from him. "Thank you. Who brought the package to the store?"

"A woman who works in the dress shop. I don't know the dressmaker's name but she has red hair. Perhaps it's a sample of fabric that she thinks we could sell," he suggested.

"Is everything all right at the store? Are you exceedingly busy? Do you need my help?" she asked.

"The other clerk and I are busy getting our deliveries organized and ready to deliver. Your father is handling all the customers who come in," he said. "We're fine."

"Nevertheless, I'll be down to help shortly," she told him. She wasn't getting much rest anyway, and she would rather be helping Father than up here fretting about Donny.

She quickly untied the twine and unwrapped the package. It held a new gown, and as she held it up and it unfolded, her eyes widened at the plunging neckline. The immodest purple dress was made of layers of sheer fabric and lace.

She would never order or wear anything like this. Why did they send it to her? Perhaps it had been delivered to her by mistake.

She glanced down as a note on the floor caught her eye. It must have fallen out when she opened the package. Opening it, she read,

*I saw this and could only imagine how beautiful and desirable you
would look wearing this gown.*

So I just had to buy it for you.

Looking forward to seeing you in it!

Your beau,

Donny

"Good heavens!" she said aloud. "How dare he assume I would wear this...this tasteless creation!"

At once, she folded the gown up and wrapped it again. When

she finished, she stormed out with it and dashed down the stairs. She would return it to the dressmaker's shop straightaway! Then hurry back to help Father.

Halfway there, she changed her mind. She would take it directly to Donny! She spun on her heels and headed toward the bank. With every step toward the building, which sat on a busy corner, her anger mounted.

She soon burst through the bank's doors and saw Donny sitting at his desk in the corner. All of her annoyance turned to unbridled fury. She hurled the package directly at him.

He ducked as it flew over his head and smacked the wall.

Jessica never shouted or yelled at people. But she did now. "You can keep your tasteless gift you brazen arrogant fool. I want no more gifts, letters, visits, or anything else from you! You are not my beau and never will be!"

She paused to catch her breath and glanced around. The bank's customers and employees, most with open mouths, stared at the two of them. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "This man has made unwanted advances toward me and refuses to stop," she tried to explain.

"What can I say?" Donny said, trying his best to look innocent. "I'm smitten by this beauty."

Jessica's brows furrowed in disbelief when at least two of the bank's employees and one customer smiled and nodded understandingly.

Donny's father rushed out of his office and marched up to her. His ruddy face was stern, and his frown made his gray brows knit together. "Miss Harrison," he said, keeping his voice low, "instead of airing your private grievances here in our lobby, please come into my office."

Jessica hesitated. "Not if your son will also be there."

"Donny, please allow Miss Harrison and me to discuss this alone."

Donny, his expression severe, didn't look happy about it, but he

nodded.

Mr. Farley motioned her inside his office, and then he calmly shut the door. "Please have a seat."

Jessica was anything but calm. Her heart drummed within her chest. "No thank you, I won't be here long."

"Miss Harrison, from what I heard from your father, and you just now, it is clear that you are not favorably considering my son's courtship."

"No, and he will not leave me alone! He continues to press his courtship. Even though I have told him repeatedly that we are not well suited, he continues to send me notes and gifts such as that indecent gown I just returned to him."

"I'm sure he means well."

"Furthermore, my priority right now is helping my father. He needs my help with the store. Every day we grow busier."

"Donny could hire someone to do what you do for the store. Surely you want to be more than a store clerk?"

Jessica's jaw tightened as her indignation rose. "It is our family's business, and I am proud of what I do for Harrison's. And as long as my father owns our store, I will be there to help him."

"Would you not prefer a life of luxury? The life of a pampered and wealthy lady?"

"No! My life is with my father. He is all I have and all I want right now."

Mr. Farley smiled at her with narrowed eyes. The cunning look on his vein-riddled face made a chill run down her spine.

"Regrettably, then, I must remind you that your father has a rather substantial loan with this bank. A loan he used to buy your store's inventory."

"Why is that relevant? We are making our payments on time," she protested. "Our store is thriving."

"I know, nevertheless your father signed a callable loan. Our bank can call up his note at any time. I can demand full payment of the remainder of the balance immediately."

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would, Miss Harrison. You see, my son and I believe that a general store on the most important road into Texas will become a goldmine as more and more Americans travel through our town on their way to settlements or land grants. That’s why I invested in the store.”

“And it is exactly why my father and I decided to build and operate a store when we first came here. Must I remind you that it is our store, not yours? And, as long as we repay our loan to you, what you and your son think of our future success is irrelevant.”

“You’re wrong, it is quite relevant,” Mr. Farley said.

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because you are the most desirable unmarried woman in our town both for your beauty and for your likely future wealth.”

His bluntness and his crass greed stunned Jessica. “My future is none of your concern.”

“My son will help you make the most of your store’s potential. He will guide you in all your financial decisions. He will help you establish contacts and large contracts with the most influential Mexican officials and citizens. He has much to offer you.”

She knew Donny was merely his father’s puppet. Donny wasn’t clever enough to do all of that. “You mean *you* have much to offer me in the way of guidance.”

“There’s that too.”

Jessica would have stood if she weren’t already standing. “You, Sir, are as arrogant and senseless as your son. My father and I don’t appreciate your threats or your conniving interest in our business. If you persist, I will have to make your coercion and improper intimidation known to the publisher of our town’s newspaper.”

In truth, Jessica wasn’t keen on making this public because she knew it might damage her reputation too.

“Mr. Slocum would laugh in your face. He’s not in the habit of publishing stories about romantic quarrels. Furthermore, I hold his note, as well. And I do enough advertising with him to keep him

inclined toward preferential treatment for my bank.”

“We’ll see,” Jessica said with more certainty than she felt. “I will give you a week to convince your son that he must leave me alone.”

“We will not give you the same amount of time to change your mind.”

His severe expression didn’t change as she stared at him. “You are destined for hell, Sir.”

Donny's father motioned him to follow him inside his office.

"Go after her. Give her one more chance to warm up to you. If she doesn't, do what needs to be done."

Donny nodded and followed Jessica out of the bank. He hurried to catch up to her. "Your maidenly nerves are understandable," he said over her shoulder as she marched toward her father's store. "You just need to understand that this is about doing what's best for your future. About you eventually becoming my wife."

"No, Donny. This is about money. The whole idea behind your courtship is *your* father acquiring *my* father's business. About the two of you benefitting from all our hard work," she told him without slowing her hurried pace. "It is clear to me now. You aren't hounding me because you like me or are attracted to me. You want me purely for your own mercenary self-interest. And your father's greed."

He stared down his nose at her. "How utterly selfish you're being."

"Me!" she bellowed and snorted in a very unladylike fashion.

Proper young ladies weren't supposed to lose their poise in public, and it shocked Donny to see Jessica's composure completely evaporate.

"You and your father are two of a kind. You both want what's best for you. Well, I won't stand for it!"

"You have no choice," he warned.

Jessica shook her head so forcefully some of her hairpins came

loose. She stopped and faced him. "We have many important and influential friends in this town, including the Alcalde, the Tylers, and the Wyllies. People who will believe what we say. People who could boycott your bank and encourage others to do so."

Donny didn't like the sound of that threat one bit. In an instant, he switched from adoration to rage. He wasn't going to let Jessica get away with this.

Jessica flinched when she glanced up at the sinister face of a madman.

His cold eyes, now dark slits, bored into her. Danger radiated off of him as he leaned toward her intimidatingly and hissed, "I don't like to be threatened."

Ironically, his words held the unmistakable undertone of a threat.

For the first time, she felt the need to strike him. If she were a man, she'd give him the hide-tanning of his life. Instead, she scooted away. "Leave me alone, you boorish brute!"

"I can't have you now, darling, but I'll have you later. When we're married." He ground the words out between his teeth, low enough that no one else could hear.

Married! The very idea was outrageous. She would never enter into a loveless marriage. For her, love was central to the idea of marriage. Only love can give marriage the breath of life. Otherwise, it is lifeless, hollow, and meaningless. Love takes the union of two people from being merely legally binding to being spiritually binding. A far stronger bond.

With a moan of distress, Jessica hurried away. Her nervousness caused her to stumble. She regained her balance but was trembling now, although she tried to hide her inner misery from him. She didn't want him to know he'd broken her fragile control.

Donny trailed behind her like an ominous cloud. A dark

warning settled on his features. Hatred blazed like lightning bolts from his stormy eyes.

She was still a good distance from her father's store. Did Donny intend to follow her there? She knew the sight of Donny would upset Pa. And he didn't need the distraction right now. Today was delivery day, and the clerks would both be out making deliveries to surrounding farms. Could she somehow get rid of Donny before she neared the store?

Someone stopped Donny to greet him. "Might I have a word with you, Mr. Farley?" the man asked.

While Donny tried to disengage himself, Jessica scurried ahead a few paces.

God, help me.

She realized Dr. Grant's office was just across the street. Dodging wagons and men on horseback, Jessica hurried toward the clinic. She darted inside, hastily closing the door behind her.

Mrs. Grant was a friend, and Jessica knew the kind woman would shelter her until Donny went back to work. Mrs. Grant worked tirelessly in their town to help women and children. She arranged for translators for Spanish-speaking patients at the clinic and gave talks on health topics in the community. The orphanage she and Baldy were establishing would protect homeless children and the Woman's Vigilance Committee she organized protected girls and young women from those who would abuse them.

Adam, Dr. and Mrs. Grant's son, a young man who ran the apothecary for them, greeted her. He was also the younger brother of Samuel Wyllie's wife, Louisa.

"Hello, Miss Harrison." With a baby face and a mass of unruly brown hair, Adam looked even younger than his sixteen years.

Caddo, Adam's big, yellow dog with one white paw, met her at the door with a wagging tail. The dog was Adam's constant companion, and wherever Adam went, Caddo wasn't far behind.

"Adam! Is Mrs. Grant here?" she asked with an anxious glance outside. Donny was gone. Her tight shoulders relaxed just a bit, but

her stomach was still a knot of uneasiness.

"I'm in here, Jessica," Mrs. Grant called from behind a clinic door. "Just changing these sheets."

"I need your help!" Jessica cried out. A hot tear trickled down her cheek.

Mrs. Grant, who served as Dr. Grant's nurse, rushed out. "What is it, dear? Are you ill?"

"How can we help?" Adam asked.

She twisted her hands fretfully as she tried to decide what to tell them. "Donny Farley was following and threatening me just now. That's why I dashed in here. He and his father are..."

"Go on," Mrs. Grant urged.

"They're trying to force me to marry Donny!"

Mrs. Grant frowned. "But why would they do that?"

"So that they can get their greedy hands on my father's store!"

Mrs. Grant blinked a few times as if disbelieving what she heard. "You're sure? That's a serious accusation."

"Yes! I'm very sure. I've tried many times to get Donny to leave me alone, but he won't. So I just met with his father, Mr. Farley, at the bank to ask him to stop his son's unwelcome courtship. My father did the same thing a few days ago. Mr. Farley implied that he would call my father's loan if I didn't marry his son. The store is doing well, but we can't pay that loan off all at once."

"That's extortion," Mrs. Grant said, looking appalled.

"What exactly is extortion?" Adam asked.

"Extortion is trying to get something through force, threats, or blackmail," Mrs. Grant said.

"What a scoundrel!" Adam said. "Next time he needs something for a headache, I might just be out of stock." The entire town relied on Adam's gift for combining wild herbs with substances like honey and oils to create various healing tinctures. Much of his knowledge came from Baldy, some from Indian healers, and some from the books he was always studying.

"I know exactly the men you need to talk to about this," she

said.

Jessica shook her head. "I don't want to involve anyone else in this. I only came in here because Donny was following me."

"I have a feeling you'll want to talk to these two. They're nephews of Mr. Wyllie and just arrived from Kentucky. But they've gone to the Wyllie's place with Baldy. He'll be back tomorrow morning. We'll figure it out then," Mrs. Grant said. "For now, Adam and I will escort you home."

"Both of you don't have to come with me. One will do," Jessica said. She glanced outside again, and there was still no sign of Donny. "Actually, he seems to have returned to the bank, so I won't need an escort after all."

"No, we're both going," Mrs. Grant insisted. "Adam may be a brilliant student of medicine," she said with a warm glance at him, "but he has some muscle on those young bones. I need a few things from your store anyway, and he can carry them back for me. Adam, please put the sign on the door that says back in an hour."

After they locked up, Jessica glanced up and down the street, but there was still no sign of Donny.

Adam and his dog led the way. Mrs. Grant looped an arm around Jessica's elbow as they followed. Greatly comforted by the motherly touch, Jessica exhaled the breath she'd been holding.

When they reached the store, surprisingly, the front door was locked. "Father never locks the store during business hours," she said. "What is going on?"

"Isn't today delivery day?" Mrs. Grant asked. "Perhaps one of the clerks locked it by mistake when they left to make a delivery."

Adam rattled the doorknob and banged on the door, and Caddo barked. Neither one got a response.

"Let's go around to the back," she told them.

Feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep in a bed, a hot bath, and a big breakfast, Rory rode beside Alexander and Baldy back into town. Before they left uncle Stephen's and cousin Samuel's place, Alexander and he had changed into clean buckskins and given their boots and hats a thorough cleaning.

"I'll see you boys soon," Dr. Grant said with a wave when they reached the livery where Baldy kept his horse. "And it better not be as patients." Baldy walked away, chuckling to himself.

"Where do you want to go first?" Alexander asked as they rode past the blacksmith's shop. The smithy looked to be doing a thriving business with several customers waiting to see him. Smiths were essential to every town to keep everything working on area farms.

"The general store. I need a new razor," Rory said. "Mine nicks me so much every time I shave I look like a butcher got ahold of me."

"That's why it's called a cut-throat razor," Alexander said.

"Well, it won't hold a sharp edge even after I strop it," he said.

"Before you buy one, let's find a place to get a haircut."

Rory nodded. All he needed to feel like his old self was a haircut. After he got one, he would start his search for the beauty he'd spotted yesterday.

They soon spotted the standard red, white, and blue pole indicating a barber. The colors of the pole came from the days when barbers practiced surgery, such as bloodletting and teeth

pulling. They found two barbers inside the small shop. Not being busy, the barbers seated both of them on two high stools. Then the rather short barbers climbed up on wooden boxes because Rory and Alexander were both so tall.

“Not too short, Sir,” Rory said.

During the haircut, Rory’s mind kept returning to the young lady he was going to try to find. The brief sight of her repeatedly floated through his mind. He was still astonished that the living, breathing embodiment of the woman he’d been imagining was truly here.

After the haircut, the barbers applied Bay Rum lotion made from West Indies bay leaf, spices, and Jamaican rum. Rory inhaled the woodsy, sweet scent. He hoped the woman he was about to look for would like it.

“Do you know a young lady who is exceptionally beautiful in this town?” Rory asked as they paid for the haircuts. He described the woman he’d seen yesterday to the barber.

“That sounds like Jessica Harrison,” the barber said. “She works at Harrison’s General Store. She’s Mr. Harrison’s daughter. She’s a real beauty and as nice as she is lovely.”

Before they left, he gave them directions to the nearby store, and they soon found themselves tying their horses in front of Harrison’s. Rory’s heart beat a little faster. What would he say to her? Would she be friendly or standoffish?

Strangely, the door was closed. Perhaps they were trying to keep the flies and mud daubers out.

Rory tried the doorknob. “It’s locked.”

“That’s odd,” Alexander said. “Why would a big store like this close in the middle of the morning?”

Rory pounded on the door, but there was no response. “Maybe they had some sort of emergency that called them away.”

They turned to leave and glanced around at the other stores in the area. Rory saw lawyers’ offices, a newspaper office, several cafes and saloons, a dressmaker, and the sheriff’s office, among

other buildings. A new inn was also under construction, and he could smell the fresh lumber, and hear the pounding of carpenters' hammers.

Then he heard a woman screaming, "Father," over and over. She sounded frantic.

"That's coming from behind the building," he told Alexander. "She might need help."

Rory took off running alongside the building. As soon as he turned the corner at the back of Harrison's, he saw her—the same beautiful woman he'd seen yesterday.

When he drew close to her, and she turned toward him, he stared breathlessly. She was the woman he'd imagined as he rode those endless miles toward this town. The woman he'd dreamed of stood before him. Exactly as he envisioned. Her long, shiny, red hair flowed down her back in curly waves. He recognized her delicate features and full lips, the color of cherries. She looked to be strong, yet she appeared slender in her green and white everyday gown. She glanced his way as he approached, and he saw that her eyes were the color of the sky on a cloudless summer day.

His heart danced with excitement. He'd found her.

Melly and Adam stood next to her.

"Can we help?" Alexander asked, coming up to them.

The young woman continued to pound on the store's double back doors, her lovely face contorted with worry. Then she glanced back at Rory with pleading eyes.

His heart thumped against his buckskin shirt. An overwhelming need to help her welled up within him. He very nearly reached out to take her hand as he asked, "What can we do?"

"Who are you?" she asked, her widened eyes studying him.

Her soft, sweet voice was like music to his mind.

Melly replied for him. "Jessica, this is Rory Wyllie, Stephen Wyllie's nephew. And this is Rory's cousin Alexander MacKay. They are both good friends of ours, the ones who have just arrived from Kentucky. Boys, this is Jessica Harrison. Her father, Mr.

Harrison, owns this store, and he's not answering our knocks. And both doors are locked for some strange reason."

So her name was Jessica, he thought. A name as beautiful as she was.

"Father is not upstairs in our living quarters. He must be inside the store. I've got to get in there," Jessica said. "My father could be hurt."

"Maybe he fell," Adam suggested.

"Stand back," Rory said. He motioned Alexander over to one door while he stood in front of the other. They both bent a shoulder and rammed the double doors. The doors flew open.

They all rushed in, and the young woman started her search, calling out for her father. Moments later, when it became apparent that the man wasn't there, she said, "Adam, please go get the sheriff."

As Adam was about to take off, a wagon pulled up to the back.

"That will be one of our clerks," Miss Harrison said. She rushed outside and called to him. "Bud, where is my father?"

"He was here when Jack and me left to make our deliveries," the clerk said as he tied the wagon team.

"I'll get the sheriff," Adam said.

"Where could Father be?" Jessica asked aloud for the nineteenth time since Adam left. "And where is that sheriff?" With every minute that passed, her concern for her father worsened.

They were now all standing outside in front of the store. She kept looking up and down the street, hoping to see some sign of Pa.

Several people stopped to inquire about what was going on, and Mrs. Grant patiently told them all. No doubt, the chinwags would have the entire town alerted within the hour.

"Don't worry, we *will* find your father," Rory said with

determination.

Something in the deep timbre of his voice was reassuring. Or maybe it was the strength she saw in his square jaw. Or perhaps it was the warmth and fire that lit his eyes like glowing blue flames. She could tell he was of a hardy cast and not the type to cower before danger. He appeared as though he would be formidable in any conflict.

Had God sent her a handsome guardian angel in her time of need? An angel clad in buckskins? The shirt's stringed opening at his neck exposed a vee of tanned skin and a hint of his muscled chest.

Rory leaned closer to her. "Has this ever happened before?"

"No. He's never disappeared before," Jessica told him. "Father would never go anywhere without telling me."

The sheriff and Adam finally came running toward the store.

As soon as they arrived, Mrs. Grant whispered to Adam, "Go fetch your father. Tell him to close the clinic until we find Mr. Harrison."

Sheriff John Hanks was a young man of perhaps twenty, with a bad complexion and a skimpy beard. A new looking belt held a pristine flintlock. Jessica wondered if he'd ever fired it. "Sorry for the delay. I was...well, never mind. What's going on here?" he asked as he stepped up onto the store's porch.

Jessica hurriedly filled him in on what had happened since she first arrived at the store with Mrs. Grant and Adam.

"I'll look for any signs of foul play," Hanks said. Then the sheriff turned on his heel and strode through the door.

"We've already looked around inside," Jessica said and followed him. "You're wasting time."

After the sheriff decided there was nothing unusual within the store, except for the backdoor lock that Rory and Alexander broke, he pronounced, "There's nothing to do but wait for him to come back."

"No! We have to look for him. We have to find him. Something

is wrong!" Jessica told Sheriff Hanks.

"I'm sorry, Miss Harrison, but there's nothing I can do," Hanks said.

"You can look for him," Alexander suggested.

Jessica swung her gaze toward Alexander. "Yes, yes. Let's go look for him!"

"Where?" the sheriff asked. "We have no idea where to look. I'm sorry, there's nothing more to do for now." He turned and strode toward the door.

Jessica was crushed. Why had she expected help from an inexperienced and inept sheriff?

"He won't look, but I will," Rory said.

"Me too," Alexander said.

"What the hell is going on here?" Dr. Grant asked as he rushed in.

"Where's Adam?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"I left him in charge of the clinic, Melly," Dr. Grant told his wife. "I didn't want to close it since I was gone most of yesterday. He's nearly as good a doc as I am anyway."

"Father has gone missing," Jessica told Baldy. "These gentlemen are going to help me find him."

"I've known them since they were boys," Dr. Grant said. "You couldn't ask for better help. I'll help too. I brought my medical bag in case he's hurt." He held up the worn black leather bag. "But I need to go get my horse. I'll be back shortly."

"Thank you, Baldy," Rory said. "Jessica, please pack up a couple of days' worth of provisions for three men. Alexander, bring our horses around to the back of the store. Bud, you need to get that horse team out back watered and fed."

"Yes, Sir," Bud said. "I'll get them over to the livery right away."

"Mrs. Grant, will you please stay here with Jessica?" Rory asked.

"Of course."

While Jessica appreciated his initiative and quick action, she didn't like him deciding what she would do. "Stay here?" Jessica asked. "I will not. I'm coming along too."

"Then you'll have to ride with one of us," Rory said. "Unless you have a horse."

"I do not," Jessica said. "May I ride with you?"

Rory looked a bit taken aback, but he nodded his agreement.

Jessica had surprised herself with such a bold request. But somehow, she knew it was the right thing to do. This handsome young man's kindness and willingness to help had quieted her mounting panic. She gazed up at his angelic blue eyes and saw a spark of some indefinable emotion. In the space between breaths, she sensed a compelling connection to him, as though she had known him for a long time, not mere minutes.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm going out back to see if I can find any signs of where he might have gone."

After he left out the back door, Jessica turned to Mrs. Grant. "Will you please manage our store while we're gone? Our clerk, Bud, can take care of most everything, but I need someone more mature in charge. I can show you what to do while Rory is outside looking for clues."

"Of course," Mrs. Grant said.

"That reminds me," Jessica said. "Bud came back with his delivery wagon, but Jack hasn't come back. Could Father be with him?"

Rory surveyed the ground behind the store and under the wagon that Bud had arrived in. He found the fresh tracks of another wagon's wheels and horse team in the dirt. He followed the tracks on foot. They led to a trail that ran alongside a creek, well behind the town's stores, and then down an incline. He could see several wagon wheel and horse teams' hoof prints leading to the trail.

Could one of them be a wagon Jessica's father left in? Did he leave to make a delivery somewhere?

Not being familiar with the area, he didn't know where the trail led, but he was going to find out. He turned around and studied the ground closely as he walked back to the store. At once, something shiny glinted on the ground. He bent to pick it up and realized it was a metal button of the type commonly used on waistcoats. The morning sun's strong rays lit up another and then another. By the time he returned to the store, he held three buttons in his hand.

He turned around and plotted in his mind's eye where he'd found each button.

They pointed to the trail.

Jessica stared down into Rory's opened palm at the gilded brass buttons. "I recognize them. They're Father's! He wears buttons like that on all his waistcoats. He orders them from a tailor in New Orleans. Where did you find them?"

"Behind your store. They pointed toward that trail," Rory said.

"Could he have been trying to show us what direction he went?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"I think so," Rory said. "He may have even left a trail for us to follow."

"Since Jack hasn't come back with our second delivery wagon," Jessica said, "I'm wondering if the two of them aren't together. Maybe they left together."

"Why would they do that?" Rory asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"I think I do," Mrs. Grant said. "Donny."

Jessica's heart squeezed. It made sense. She recalled his threats earlier that morning. Could he have come here and threatened Pa? Or worse? "Good Lord, you're right. Donny must have come here when I darted into the clinic."

"Who is Donny?" Rory asked.

"An unwelcome suitor of Jessica," Mrs. Grant explained. "He's trying to coerce her into marrying him. He and his father want this store."

Rory frowned, and he looked as though a dozen questions popped into his head. He must have decided to put them off for

now because he simply asked, “Jessica, can you get one of your father’s other waistcoats so we can tell how many buttons are on each?”

“I believe at least a dozen buttons,” she told him, “but let’s go look.”

“I’ll gather up some provisions for you,” Mrs. Grant said. “In case you have to spend the night on the trail.”

“We must hurry,” Rory told Jessica. He followed behind her, and they sprinted out the back door and up the stairs that ran along the side of the two-story building.

Jessica dashed into her father’s room while Rory waited in their sitting area. She grabbed a waistcoat from his wardrobe and rushed out, holding it up. “Thirteen! I remember Father saying there are thirteen buttons because of the number of original colonies. He always wears one of these vests over his work shirts in the store, even in the summer.”

“Let’s go!” Rory urged. “Gather up what you need. We have to see if we can spot any more buttons before dark.”

Jessica grabbed a blanket and her comb, stuck them in a satchel, and flung the shoulder strap over her head. “Rory, thank you for helping me.”

“This is not how I wanted to meet you, but I’m very glad I did.”

She smiled at him and then led the way downstairs. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Alexander rode up behind the store with their horses.

Alexander handed a buckskin gelding’s reins to Rory. If she hadn’t been so worried about Pa, she would have taken the time to admire and pet the beautiful golden creature.

Rory smoothly vaulted onto the horse. Then he reached down and plucked Jessica up and settled her side-saddle on his lap, both of her legs dangling near the horse’s shoulder. Normally she was always concerned about decorum and propriety, but she wasn’t just now. Her only concern was finding her father.

“Okay?” he asked.

She nodded. Other than being beset by worry, she was fine—except for the nearness of Rory. His strong jaw was covered in a short beard, the same rich dark color as the soft waves of his hair. And his pleasant manly scent was woodsy and spicy. His solidly muscled thigh bumped against her leg, and beneath the softness of his buckskin shirt, hard muscles covered his chest and arms. She'd never sat this close to a man, and his closeness made a strange sensation flap around her rapidly beating heart.

Baldy raced up on his gelding and joined them. He towed a smaller mare behind him. "I brought Melly's mare for Jessica to ride."

Jessica told him, "Thank you," but disappointment surged through her as she slid off of Rory's gelding with his help. At once, she missed Rory's closeness. Strangely, the few moments she'd spent sitting beside his large and powerful body were the most comforting she could remember ever having. It was like being enveloped in a shroud of safety. The sudden lack of it left her feeling cold and forlorn.

Rory glanced down at her, and their eyes met. She saw the same sense of loss on his face. It was almost as if he could hear her silent thoughts.

Mrs. Grant came out with two blankets and a bag of provisions, and Baldy tied them next to his medical bag on his horse. "As soon as Adam can, have him go to the Wyllies. Have him tell Bear and Sam what's happened. We may need their help."

"And tell them, we'll be following that trail," Rory said, pointing toward the creek.

"I will. Be careful," Mrs. Grant told them.

Along the creek, towering evergreens, cottonwood and oak hardwoods, dogwood, and blooming buckeye grew on either side of the deserted trail that Rory suspected must have originally been

an Indian trail.

“I’ll look to the left and straight ahead. You look to the right,” Rory told Jessica. “Baldy, follow behind me and survey the left side too looking for shiny gold buttons. Alexander, look for the same on the right. With two people searching each side, we’ll be less likely to miss one.”

They all nodded their agreement, and they set off down the incline.

“Where does this trail go?” Rory asked.

“It’s called Lanana Creek Trail,” Jessica said. “It was originally a Caddo Indian footpath.”

“Are there Indians now?” Alexander asked in an anxious voice.

“Sometimes,” Baldy said, “but they’re peaceful.”

“Look!” Jessica said and pointed. “There’s another button. Should we pick it up?”

“No,” Rory told her. “We can’t spare the time.” He nudged Buck to go a little faster because they were obviously on the right trail. But how far would it go before Mr. Harrison ran out of buttons? There were only nine left.

They continued on for some time before anyone spotted another button. This time it was Alexander. That left eight buttons. The sun was already high overhead.

“Why would this guy named Donny want to take your father?” Rory asked.

“I don’t know,” Jessica said. “Unless it was to force him to sign over the store. But his father could call our bank loan, and since we couldn’t pay it back all at once, they could take the store that way, so why would Donny feel the need to abduct Father? I just hope my father is unharmed.”

Rory hadn’t wanted to tell Jessica, but he’d also found spots of blood on the loading dock behind the store.

An hour and two button discoveries later, the road forked at a pool of water that sat below moderately steep limestone slopes. The water was surrounded by deep silt loam that grew mesquite

and tall grass. Between two boulders, a spring of clear water flowed into the pond. It was no wonder generations of Indians came to this beautiful watering hole. For a moment, Rory allowed himself to fantasize about swimming in the pond with Jessica, the water cooling their passion heated bodies. He shook the tantalizing image from his head.

“Left leads to the Lanana’s falls across the pond,” Jessica said. “They can’t be there. We can see everything between here and there. There’s no sign of a wagon.”

“That’s true,” Rory conceded. “So we’ll go right. But why bring your father all the way out here? It makes no sense.”

“It would if there’s a cave behind those falls,” Alexander said. “On the other side of those boulders and that limestone ridge.”

Baldy took his horse a few yards to the right. “This path to the right looks as though it’s been used more often than the trail that leads left.”

Rory rode closer to Baldy, bent over his horse, and peered down. “Jessica, your father just sent us a message. Here’s another button. Let’s go.”

With a smile, Donny surveyed the tarp-covered stacks of crated liquor and rifles in what he called his Banker's Cavern. Soon he would sell these contraband goods to a local band of outlaws made up of American criminals, renegade Indians, and Mexican bandits.

He'd heard about the cave from an old-timer at the saloon who claimed he had ridden out a terrible storm in the cave. After buying the man a bottle of his favorite whiskey, he took him aside and managed to pry the cave's exact location from him. For another bottle, the old-timer agreed to show him the location the next day. They'd found it with little difficulty, and Donny paid him to keep the location a secret from everyone else.

His partners from Louisiana had arrived a few days later with the stolen goods. Late that night, they'd brought the freight wagon down Lanana Creek Trail and unloaded it into the cave. Then they had covered the entrance with a good deal of brush. Overall, the exchange had been a cinch to accomplish, and he was rather proud of himself. Now all he had to do was to get the goods to the buyers.

He'd make a nice profit, enough to open up a second bank in San Augustine, thirty miles east of Nacogdoches. As soon as he received the governor's approval to open a bank there, he would take the money and Jessica there. The locals, some of whom he already knew, would welcome the handsome new couple to their growing town.

Although his father didn't think he was ready to open a bank on his own, Donny certainly did. For weeks, he'd studied the business of banking. He was already fully grounded in banking principles, and more importantly, quite aware of the possibilities it would provide for future wealth.

"I'd advise you to end this pointless travesty now," Harrison said. A trickle of blood dripped from the wound on the man's head, a result of a blow from Donny's pistol. The old man probably needed stitches.

Donny hadn't wanted to hit him, but the stubborn fellow put up a fight and refused to get in the wagon. He'd lost his temper and knocked the obstinate old man on the head. Then he'd smashed him on the face with the butt of his pistol. Overpowered, Harrison didn't resist when he'd loaded him into the back of the store's wagon and threw a tarp over him. Then Donny had made the frightened clerk lock Harrison's doors before they left so no one would steal the inventory. After all, he wanted to protect what would be his someday.

Encouraged toward cooperation by Donny's pistol, the store clerk, named Jack, had driven the wagon. Donny had sat next to him, showing him the way to the well-hidden cave.

As soon as they arrived at the cave, he made Jack clear away the brush covering the entrance. Then Donny tied them both up with a rope he found in the back of the wagon used to tie goods down.

Leaning against one of the damp cave walls, Harrison looked unusually disheveled with his graying hair spiked up, his damp, apron-covered clothing all askew, and his face bruised, bloodied, and dirtied.

He hated that Jessica had forced him to treat her father this way. He shook his head at her selfishness.

"How long do you intend to keep us tied up here?" Harrison asked.

"You'll be my prisoners only until your daughter marries me,"

Donny told them.

"She doesn't want you to even court her, much less marry her," Harrison said. "We've repeatedly tried to explain that to you."

"As soon as I tell her I have her father and one of his clerks hidden away with no food or water, she'll agree to marry me. We'll be married by this afternoon. Tomorrow morning at the latest. I just have to find a preacher I can bribe."

"She won't agree!" Harrison said with incensed bluster. "She'll go to the sheriff. You'll soon regret the way you've treated us."

"Oh, she'll agree," Donny said. "And she won't go to the sheriff."

"She will," Harrison insisted. "And she'll enlist the help of our friends too, like the Wyllies."

"I don't think so. I'll tell her that if she does, *my 'friends'* will find you here before the sheriff and a search party ever will. I'll let her know that they would probably kill you, Mr. Harrison, and relieve you of your scalp and perhaps your ballocks. No telling what they might do to young Jack here." He peered down at the skinny, wide-eyed lad.

"Your friends?" Jack asked him. The boy's face had gone ghostly pale.

"A band of ruthless and lethal outlaws named *los diablos Tejanos*."

"The Tejano Devils," Harrison said. "I'm not surprised you're in league with men like that."

"Why? Why are you?" Jack asked Donny.

"Because they will soon buy these guns and whiskey from me," Donny said. "I expect them any time now. I've met them only once, and they're not men to be trifled with. Those Mexican drovers that were killed while driving cattle to Louisiana, that was their doing. And they also..."

"Enough!" Harrison's face turned red, and he barked, "You're nothing but an outlaw yourself."

"No, I'm a banker, Sir. A go-between. Between the sellers of

contraband and the purchasers. I facilitate financial transactions. It's similar to you buying from wholesalers and selling to your store's patrons. It's just business."

"It's nothing like my business. I operate a legitimate and law-abiding store."

Donny narrowed his eyes and glared at the man. "And I'm an upstanding banker."

"Donny, your mind has made an unwise withdrawal," Harrison said. "If you don't stop now, I fear you may soon be in the red."

"Hmph," Donny said, appreciating the banking comparison, but not liking the implication. "There's nothing wrong with my mind. You'll see."

Harrison exhaled. "I still say Jessica will never agree to wed you."

"Mr. Harrison, no one knows where you are except me, and I'll keep your location secret until Jessica becomes my wife. So you'd better pray that she agrees."

Harrison glowered at him. "The fool doth think he is wise."

Donny smirked at the Shakespearan quotation so common even he knew it. "Shakespeare is hardly appropriate here," he said with a sweep of his hand. "This is no play-acting. It is deadly real, I assure you."

Jack whimpered, "I don't want to die. I haven't even started living yet."

"Don't worry yourself," Donny said. "Jessica won't let her father or you die of thirst or hunger."

"But what about the Tejano Devils?" Jack asked in a shaky voice.

Donny shrugged. "I can't predict what they will do."

"Donny, let the boy go," Harrison begged. "You only need me to accomplish what you want."

"No, I can't risk him creating a fuss in town. Hopefully, she will marry me speedily, and I can get back soon to release you both. She won't want a young man like Jack here turned over to my

friends for their sport.”

“I would never have believed you capable of such vileness. What you’re doing amounts to extortion and potentially murder,” Harrison said. “Why didn’t you just call my loan as both you and your father threatened?”

“Because I realized even if we did demand full payment, you and your daughter would find a way to come up with the money. Since Jessica and Rebecca are such good friends, you could have borrowed the funds to repay the loan from Rebecca’s father, Mr. Tyler, for instance. Or from the Wyllies. I had to be certain Jessica would have no choice but to marry me. You, Mr. Harrison, are the only person she truly cares about. So I’m holding you as collateral, so to speak.”

“Collateral?” Harrison asked, sounding incredulous.

“Yes, surety for her cooperation, now and in the future.” Donny wished for a moment that he and his father felt the same deep love that Jessica shared with her father. They had never been close, and in recent years it seemed they’d grown even further apart. He doubted his father even loved him. Father certainly didn’t understand him and never would. But Jessica loved her father, and as long as the old man lived, Donny could use that fact to ensure her cooperation.

“Don’t do this,” Harrison begged. “You simply cannot marry Jessica under these shameful circumstances. You will dishonor yourself and her.”

“I must. This is the only way she will agree to be my wife,” Donny said. “The woman is beyond stubborn.”

“You don’t even love her,” Harrison said. “And she is not attracted to you. Surely there’s another woman who would willingly marry a fine-looking young man like you.”

“But there’s no woman whose family owns a store with such boundless earnings potential. And none as beautiful as our Jessica.” Donny began to pace in front of the two. “I admit our match will be challenging. I fear I will suffer a lifelong battle to

keep your badly behaved daughter in line. But I'm not worried. I've learned how to tame a disobedient woman from my father." And he could always threaten her father with further harm to ensure her willingness to act the proper wife. To ensure her submission when he went to her bed. The thought of bedding her made his pulse quicken, and he abruptly stopped pacing. "Well, I must be off. My nuptials await me."

"Wait!" Jack yelled. The weakling's eyes were wide with fear. "What if your friends come while you're gone? Before you get back? What should we tell them?"

"I'd beg for mercy."

He grabbed a bottle of whiskey and headed toward the cave entrance, chuckling to himself as he heard Jack whimper. What a coward.

Honestly, it didn't matter to Donny if the two were alive or dead when he returned for the agreed-upon money, the outlaws were to leave in the cave. He had no worries about the desperados leaving with the goods without paying. They wouldn't cheat him because they wanted this arrangement to continue on for some time. Even among thieves and murderers, there is honesty if it is in their best interest.

And in this case, it was definitely in their best interest. The Tejano Devils needed many more rifles to sell to the Comanches that had moved into Texas and were now known as 'Lords of the Plains.' Comanche braves had earned a reputation for looting, burning, murdering, and kidnapping. Trading goods with the Comanche was one of the only ways to ensure a modicum of safety against their attacks.

Did it bother him that he was selling weapons that might wind up in the hands of Indians? No, because he also intended to sell them to the calvary and militias too. He would also sell to the Tonkawa if he could find a way to communicate with them. The tribe had recently entered into a treaty with Stephen F. Austin, pledging their support against the Comanche.

Indians, military, or Mexicans. A customer was a customer. As a banker, he didn't pick sides. He merely acted as a neutral intermediary.

Before he climbed onto the wagon, he upended the whiskey bottle and drank greedily. For all sides, the liquor only enhanced the deal he'd brokered.

He loved being a banker.

Jessica's nerves grew feverish as Rory cautiously followed the trail of buttons. Each step of Rory's horse brought them closer to her father. She could feel it in her bones. And with each step of her horse, as she followed behind him, half in anticipation, half in dread, her gratitude toward Rory grew.

With Rory's unwavering concentration on tracking, they had found ten buttons. That left only three. How far away was Father? Worry squeezed her heart. Would Donny have hurt Father? What would they do if they encountered Donny? What if it wasn't Donny at all but someone else who had abducted Father and Jack? She had no answers. Only questions. And her active imagination supplied too many horrid possibilities.

Limestone boulders and layered ledge rock rose up on both sides of the path only a little wider than a wagon. What would they find at the end of this trail? She shifted uneasily in the saddle. Melly's mare grew twitchy too.

Rory suddenly tugged his horse's reins and brought them to a halt. He peered back at Dr. Grant and Alexander, and whispered, "We're close. I heard a horse nicker." He faced her. "Jessica, please don't put yourself in danger. Stay back."

She nodded. She didn't want to do anything that would jeopardize Father or anyone else. Since she wasn't armed, she would simply follow behind them.

All three men withdrew their pistols, and they continued following the lonely and desolate trail up an incline. Dr. Grant rode

next to Rory, and Alexander rode behind the two of them. Were they walking into an ambush? Or would they surprise whoever had abducted Father?

Jessica followed a short distance after them. The narrow trail veered left and then right and then gradually opened up into a wider open area surrounded by large boulders and thick brush.

Her eyes widened as she spotted Donny untying Pa's wagon team near the entrance to a cave. So it was Donny! Her jaw clenched in anger. She scanned the wagon and the area around it, searching for her father but saw no sign of him. He must be in the cave.

Alive or dead? Her heart skipped a beat.

As soon as Rory and the two other men moved closer, Donny froze as he heard them approach. He spun around to face them, his features aghast. He held a pistol in his hand.

"Where is Mr. Harrison?" Rory demanded, moving his horse to the right side of the clearing.

"Donny, what have you done?" Jessica asked as she moved her horse around Alexander and Baldy and into the left side of the open area. "If you've hurt my father, I'll..." What would she do? With difficulty, she swallowed and found her voice and her courage. "I'll kill you myself."

Donny's chin rose defiantly, and he took a step toward Jessica. "Jessica! How did you find me? Did that drunken old-timer at the tavern tell you? Well, it doesn't matter. I was on my way to get you anyway."

"Father!" Jessica shouted at him. "Where is he?"

"Here! In the cave!" her father bellowed, his voice muffled by the cave's walls.

"I'm in here, too," Jack yelled. "Help us."

She dismounted, tied the mare on some brush, and hurried toward the cave entrance.

"Halt, Jessica!" Donny yelled. "Or I'll shoot."

Jessica stopped suddenly, her legs frozen with fear. Would he

dare shoot her? Her breath caught in her lungs as she realized he just might. She turned around and saw Rory, Alexander, and Dr. Grant all level their pistols on Donny.

“Put your weapon down,” Rory firmly commanded.

“I’ll kill her if the three of you don’t drop your weapons,” Donny countered.

“Like hell, you will,” Rory snarled.

“I swear, I will,” Donny threatened.

“Please, I don’t want anyone hurt,” Jessica pleaded. “Donny, surely you realize you must give up.”

“Never,” Donny swore, “unless you agree to marry me today. Say you will and swear it on your father’s life, and I will put my pistol down.”

Jessica swallowed the bile rising in her throat.

“We marry today. Give me your word, Jessica,” Donny warned. “Do it now!”

Good Lord, what was she to do? If she didn’t agree, Rory and the others would surely kill Donny. One of them might be killed too. She didn’t want that. “I...”

“No, Jessica, don’t agree,” Rory said. He stepped his gelding closer to Donny.

“Who the hell are you anyway?” Donny asked, his weapon still pointing at Jessica.

“I’m Rory Wyllie, the man she *will* marry,” Rory said, keeping his eyes and aim trained on Donny. “Someday. If she’ll have me.”

Jessica gasped in utter astonishment, and she stared at Rory. She’d known this man mere hours, and he was saying he wanted to marry her? She couldn’t speak, her mind spun with bewilderment. New but powerful feelings for Rory tumbled through her heart as she tried to understand the significance of his words. Did he mean what he said, or was he just trying to draw a response from Donny?

“Ye’d best listen to him, Sir,” Alexander said. “When Rory makes his mind up, I doubt even God could stop him.”

“I’m not listening to anyone but Jessica,” Donny said. “What say you, Jessica? Do you agree to marry me?”

Jessica squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. This was all so bizarre. Although she barely knew Rory, she would marry him any day rather than Donny. Already she sensed what a good, strong man he was. A strength that came more from his character than from his muscled body. A strength sorely lacking in Donny.

She knew she couldn’t risk Rory’s life. Or Alexander’s. The only way she could guarantee the safety of all concerned was to agree to Donny’s demand. But if she swore on Pa’s life, there would be no breaking her word.

She glanced toward her buckskin angel. Honor and goodness radiated off of him like the rays of the sun. Her heart broke into sharp pieces. They would never have a chance to find out what might have been.

In the distance, Rory heard hoofbeats coming up the trail.

“Ah, my partners are arriving just in time,” Donny said.

“Partners?” Rory asked.

“The Tejano Devils,” Donny said. “They’re led by an aristocrat. An English nobleman. They’re the buyers of what’s in the cave.” He sounded as though he was proud to be doing business with the man.

Baldy’s expression grew livid. “Andrew Astley is no more noble than this horse. Actually, less so. He’s a brutal sadist and a deserter. Why are you doing business with his gang of thieves and murderers?”

Rory knew the answer—money. Donny wanted to make it quick and easy.

What’s in the cave?” Baldy demanded.

“That’s none of your business Doc,” Donny said.

With his free hand, Donny pointed to a gap in the boulders. “If I

were you three fellas, I'd leave before they got here. You can disappear through there. It's wide enough to walk your horses through."

"What about Jessica?" Rory asked. "And her father and Jack?"

"She stays with me," Donny said, his weapon still trained on Jessica. "And until we're married, so does Mr. Harrison. You can take the skinny kid if you hurry."

Although still some distance away, the sound of the hoofbeats was growing louder.

Rory was inclined to just shoot him, but Donny's finger rested on his pistol's trigger—it wasn't placed alongside the barrel as it should have been. Rory couldn't risk the man's weapon discharging and shooting Jessica. Or killing her.

He couldn't lose the woman of his dreams on the same day he'd found her. He wouldn't let that happen. He wasn't going to let anything happen to her. Ever.

Alexander began walking his horse toward a spot between Jessica and Donny.

Rory quickly realized what his cousin intended. He was going to put his horse between Donny and Jessica so that Rory could fire his weapon. It was a brilliant idea, except for the danger it posed to Alexander and Thunder. He prayed neither would be shot.

Alexander suddenly swerved to the right, angling his horse toward Donny. Then he yelled, "Ya!"

Thunder charged and bolted forward on his powerful hips. The horse seemed to sense the enemy, and with ears pinned back and a snort, he stampeded toward Donny.

Donny's eyes widened in alarm and then flashed panic.

The wagon team startled too and began lurching, jerking the wagon forward and then backward.

Alexander threw himself over the horse's neck as Donny swung his pistol toward him and fired.

Thunder plowed through the black powder smoke, and Donny screamed as the horse's powerful chest collided with him and

knocked him backward. His body hurled against the wagon's wheel. As he hit the steel hub with a crushing, sickening sound, they heard bones break. The man crumpled to the ground.

Right in front of Donny, Thunder came to a shuddering halt, lowering his rear hips and planting his hooves deep in the dirt.

Alexander lost his seat on the horse and flew over Thunder's neck. He landed in the back of the wagon.

Thunder reared, and his front hooves came crashing down on Donny's chest.

Jessica screamed and covered her face when she caught sight of Donny's bloodied and mangled form. Then she ran toward the cave, yelling, "Father!"

Rory flew off his horse and still holding Buck's reins, he reached for Thunder. "Whoa, boy. Whoa."

The still agitated and skittish horse pulled toward the wagon bed. As soon as Alexander sat up, though, Thunder calmed.

His cousin rubbed his head and grimaced.

"Are you hit?" Baldy and Rory asked at once.

"Na," Alexander said. "A little shook up is all. Is Thunder all right?"

Rory nodded. "Just a little jumpy." He glanced down at Donny.

In the last seconds of his life, his voice hoarse and rasping, Donny said, "I wish...I wish..."

Baldy dismounted and checked Donny's neck for a pulse. "Dead."

"Dead?" Alexander blurted. He leaned over the wagon's side and stared down, disbelief on his face. "I only wanted to knock him over."

"He got what he deserved," Rory said. "Time to think about us. We can't escape before that gang gets here. And if we try, they'll follow us."

Baldy nodded agreement and pointed to the cave. "Get inside that cave. And bring the horses. Quick. That bunch of devils is nearly here."

Leading their horses, Rory, Alexander, and Baldy rushed toward the cave entrance as the sound of hoofbeats in the distance grew ever closer. It sounded like a goodly number of riders. And perhaps a wagon or two.

“Wait!” Rory said to Baldy and Alexander, stopping them. “Let’s move Harrison’s wagon in front of the cave entrance.”

“Yes, that will give us some protection,” Baldy agreed. “But get the horses inside the cave first!”

All three hurried their mounts inside the cave where they handed their reins to Jessica.

“Tie the horses to those crates further back in the cave,” Rory told her.

Then they rushed outside again. Rory jumped up onto the wagon seat and guided the team so that the wagon was as close as possible to the cave entrance.

“I’ll unharness that team and tie them well away, so they’re not caught in our fight. If we have to fight,” Alexander said.

“Don’t have time to tie them. Just slap their rears and get them out of here!” Rory barked.

“We’ll have to fight. You can be sure of that,” Baldy said. “I’ll get Donny’s pistol. We are going to need it.”

“Who are these Devil fellows anyway?” Rory asked Baldy.

“They’re a terror to be reckoned with,” he answered succinctly as he hurried toward Donny’s body.

After Alexander unhitched the wagon team and sent them

running away, the three of them rushed inside the cave with only seconds to spare.

Jessica now knelt beside her father, who was still tied up and sitting next to Jack. She glanced up at Rory as he drew near. In the dim lighting of the cave, her beautiful blue eyes glistened with moisture.

“Baldy, please come check Father’s head,” she said. “He’s bleeding.”

“I’ll get my medical bag,” Baldy said. “And my rifle. I fear we will soon have unwanted company.” Like Rory and Alexander, the doctor already carried two pistols on his belt, but they would need every weapon they could muster.

“Who’s coming?” Harrison asked. “Is it the Tejano Devils?”

“We think so,” Jessica said. “Donny was about to make a deal with them for whatever is in this cave.”

“That’s what he told me. What was that fool thinking?” Harrison asked.

“As always, only about himself,” Jessica told him.

Her father nodded. “How did you find us?”

Jessica glanced toward Rory. “Rory found your buttons and then tracked you here,” she explained. “He’s newly arrived from Kentucky with his cousin Alexander. They are both nephews of Stephen Wiley.”

“I was hoping someone would be smart enough to look for my clues,” Harrison said and glanced up at Rory with gratitude on his face. “I can see the family resemblance. Your Uncle Stephen is a good man.”

Rory knelt beside Mr. Harrison and quickly untied his hands and feet as he introduced himself, “I’m Rory, Sir. And that fellow is my cousin, Alexander.”

Alexander nodded politely as he untied Jack.

“Thank you, young men, for coming to our aid,” Harrison said. “I heard a shot. Was anyone injured?”

“Donny is dead,” Jessica said. “Killed by Alexander’s horse.”

“Good,” Jack said and rubbed his raw wrists. “He was going to leave us here to be murdered by his so-called friends.”

“Those friends are almost here,” Alexander told him. “Do you have a weapon?”

“Yes, a rifle,” Jack said. “It’s under the wagon seat. I keep it in case I encounter an aggressive wild animal when I’m out making deliveries.”

“Get it,” Alexander said. “And hurry.”

“I can’t believe Donny’s shot didn’t hit you,” Rory told Alexander as they hurriedly withdrew their rifles from their scabbards and powder and ball from their saddlebags. “You were right in front of him.”

Baldy glanced up from examining Mr. Harrison. “Smashing the barrel of your handgun into somebody’s skull is a good way to throw off its aim.”

Baldy sounded as though he spoke from experience. Rory knew the doctor dealt with his share of threats on the frontier.

“Will Father need stitches?” Jessica asked Baldy. “Will he be all right?”

“He was hit pretty hard on the head and face. Yes, three or four stitches,” Baldy said, handing her a pad he’d generously moistened with whiskey. “I want you to clean the blood up with this and then gently apply pressure while I get ready to stitch him up.”

“They’re almost here!” Jack shouted as he jumped down from the wagon. “Look!”

Rory and Alexander peered outside and saw riders coming up the trail. There looked to be at least a dozen of them, and they were followed by a large sturdy wagon and team.

“They’ve come here expecting to buy what’s in these crates,” Mr. Harrison said and then winced when Baldy poured whiskey on the gash in his scalp.

“What’s in the crates?” Rory asked as he kept his eyes pinned on the approaching riders. As they drew closer, his heartbeat grew faster.

“Rifles and whiskey,” Harrison said. “Those fellows likely want to sell it all again at a profit. And they’ll be fighting mad when they discover Donny’s body out there, and somebody else holed up with the goods they want.”

Finished with stitching up Harrison’s head, Baldy came over and crouched down beside the wagon bed and examined their situation. “Fortunately, the wagon is made of sturdy, thick wood planks, but shots fired through the wooden spokes of the wheels will get through. We need to shove some of those crates up against these wheels to protect our legs. Hurry!”

Shaped much like a small coffin, the rifle crates would stop any low flying lead fired toward them. Rory, Alexander, Jack, and Baldy, each grabbing a corner, carried the heavy rifle crates into position and made two side-by-side stacks.

Keeping their heads down, the four of them peered outside.

The gang was now riding into the open area in front of the cave, creating a swirling cloud of dust around the already dusty horses and men. The heavily-armed, rough-looking mercenaries included bearded frontiersmen, mustached Mexicans, and several long-haired Indians. Based upon the clothing and scalps the Indians wore, Rory suspected they had recently been pillaging and scalping.

“Who are these men?” Alexander whispered. “They look like they rode straight out of hell.”

Baldy, who peered out from behind them, said, “The Tejano Devils have been implicated in numerous reports of looting and rape. They’re also cattle rustlers and ruthless gunmen known to have killed many, including a pair of brothers in front of their mother. Their only purpose is the money they will make. No matter the cost to others.”

Rory’s heart sank to his stomach, but he made up his mind to die bravely if he had to die. Nonetheless, dying was not his intention. With pulse-pounding certainty, four thoughts stampeded through his head in rapid succession.

He had someone to protect from these men.

Someone he planned to marry someday.

He had to keep the others safe too.

He had to stay alive to do that.

Accepting the weight of that responsibility, he straightened his back and squared his shoulders.

“Do na worry yourself,” Alexander said as if reading his mind. “We’ll dispense with these hooligans. We didna come to Texas to die.”

When Alexander was wound-up, he often sounded just like Bear. “No, we came to live,” Rory agreed with a glance toward Jessica. He lifted his longrifle to his shoulder. “Jessica, please go sit with your father. I don’t want you in the line of fire.”

“Why don’t we just give them what they want?” Jessica asked.

“No!” her Father called to them with both anger and desperation in his voice. “They’ll likely kill us men and take Jessica. You can’t let that happen!”

“That’s true,” Baldy agreed. “We also can’t give them what they want because they’ll likely sell these rifles to Comanches. We can’t let them do that.”

With some difficulty, Harrison stood and came up to them. “What can Jessica and I do?” he asked Baldy.

“Yes, how can we help?” Jessica asked.

Rory glanced her way. He didn’t bother to argue with her. The look in her eyes said she was determined to do her part in this fight. He had to admire her spirit and courage. When this was over, he was going to enjoy getting to know her better.

“You can load for us,” Baldy said. He quickly showed them how to properly load the flintlock rifles and pistols.

While Baldy taught them to load, Rory broke open a crate and grabbed half a dozen rifles. “Help me load these,” he told Alexander and Jack. When they finished, they loaded another half dozen. They would all prefer shooting with their own rifle, but they could use these while their rifles were being loaded.

“Mr. Harrison, you load for Jack and Alexander. And Jessica, load for Rory and me,” Baldy said.

They lined up alongside the wagon. Jack and Alexander on the left with Mr. Harrison right behind them. Baldy and Rory positioned themselves on the right with Jessica behind them. “We need to fire in turns,” Baldy said. “That way, we’re not all reloading at the same time. Alexander, you shoot first. Jack, count to ten and then shoot. Rory, you and I will do the same.”

“How do we know who to shoot?” Jack asked.

“Shoot the one closest to you,” Rory said.

“And aim carefully,” Baldy added. “A missed shot is the same as no shot at all.”

“When will the shooting start?” Jack asked.

“As soon as I kill Andrew Astley,” Baldy growled. “I’ve wanted that man since Melly and I treated a woman he and his men raped. She was the mother who saw her two sons shot. She’s since died of grief and shame. I could tell you of a dozen more gruesome crimes his gang has committed, but I’ll spare you.” The doctor’s eyes burned with anger.

The look on his face made Rory hope that they could kill enough of these desperados that the gang would no longer plague Texas.

“Who’s in there?” a man with an English accent yelled. “Come out and deal with us. We can’t deal with a dead man.”

From the darkness of the cave, Rory eyed the gang and their leader. All held pistols in their hands and swarmed like angry wasps in the open area in front of them.

Their leader, the man Baldy had called Andrew Astley, was lean and tall. In fact, he did give the appearance of an entitled aristocrat more in the way he sat his horse and glared at the cave than anything else. His black hair was tied at his neck, and he wore an outdated tricorne and military-style jacket. His nose and chin were both angled up as he peered toward the cave with piercing eyes.

Baldy hollered to him, “Astley, this is Dr. Grant. As a doctor, I want nothing more than to see you pay for the cruelty and suffering you’ve inflicted. But I’m also a preacher. And as a preacher, I ask you to surrender to God and to us.”

They heard the gang erupt in laughter and guffawing.

Undeterred by their mirth, Baldy continued, “Ask God for forgiveness and face justice for your crimes.”

“I’m here for rifles, not religion,” Astley yelled back in a cultured English accent. The man’s eyes said he wasn’t going to play by the rules of God or man, and he was willing to murder to prove it. “Go to the devil!”

“I’d be happy to send *you* there. One last chance. Give up now,” Baldy shouted.

“Listen to him!” Jessica shouted. “We don’t want anyone to die!”

“I want those rifles,” Astley yelled. “Deal with me! I have gold.”

“No!” Baldy roared. “They don’t belong in the hands of killers or Comanches.”

“Fire!” Astley commanded.

Rory pulled Jessica to the ground and crouched over her. “Stay down!” he told her. He regretted that by speaking she had revealed to the Devils that there was a woman in the cave.

At once, the Devils shot their pistols toward the cave entrance.

For an interminable few moments, in a deafening roar, they were peppered with the pistol shots of the entire gang.

“Take cover!” Astley commanded his men.

Baldy raised his longrifle, took a breath, and fired.

Astley jerked as the lead hit his shoulder. But he stayed in the saddle and slipped his horse into the cover of the boulders and heavy brush. In seconds, the rest of his gang scattered, heading into the woods and between boulders.

With their longrifles and keen eyes, Rory and Alexander managed to hit two of the riders before they were able to take cover. Each of their shots reverberated in the cave with an unnerving roar.

At once, the other Devils began firing their rifles with a deafening thunder. Shots came at them like streaks of lightning, jarring and powerful. As lead tore into the limestone outside the cave, rock shattered and fractured raining hail-like pebbles all around them. The shots that hit the wagon’s wood sent sharp splinters blasting through the air. How long would the wagon hold up?

How long would they hold up?

Rory heard Jessica whimper, but she never stopped reloading. Crouched next to the stacked crates, she was reasonably safe from the line of fire. But this battle had to be an unnerving nightmare for her. It was for him. He did not expect their first full day in Texas to be spent fighting for their lives.

He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her. Reassure her

that everything would be all right. But the best way to keep her safe was to return lead toward this vicious gang. Unfortunately, he couldn't see the Devils through the heavy brush, so he was forced to just fire into the spots they were most likely to be.

A few moments later, the shots coming from the gang stopped altogether. Rory figured the gang must be devising a plan of attack. He took the opportunity to kneel next to Jessica. "I'm so sorry you're having to endure this."

"I thought when Donny died that it would be the end of my troubles," she said. "But it's not."

"Don't worry, we *will* prevail," he said.

"But we have no water. How long can we hold out?" she whispered to him as she reloaded a rifle.

"We have some water in our canteens. We'll hold out as long as we need too," he said.

She glanced over at her father, who was still reloading rifles for Alexander and Jack, although his movements were now slow and clumsy. "Father looks so pale. He needs water and rest."

Rory turned to his left and spoke to Baldy. "Please check on Mr. Harrison. Jessica is worried."

"I was just getting ready to do that," Baldy said and leaned his rifle against the wagon before he moved toward Mr. Harrison.

Rory made sure Alexander and Jack were still focused on the threat before he turned around to face Jessica. He wanted to give her some hope. Speaking softly, he said, "I don't know how long this will take to be over, but when it is, I want us to get to know one another. That is when you're ready for a real suitor. I know you've just had a bad experience."

"What you said to Donny about marrying me, did you mean that or were you just trying to draw his attention toward you?"

He gazed into her eyes, trying to judge how he should answer. He decided honesty was called for. He didn't want to start a relationship with this woman by lying to her. "I did."

"Why? You barely know me."

He reached out and took hold of her hand. He felt a slight tremble in her fingers as a blush raced up her neck and into her face.

His body reacted as well to touching her. He would swear his heart shivered. "I know you better than you think. I've been dreaming and daydreaming about you during our entire ride from Kentucky to here. Every time I did, I seemed to know you better. And soon, I knew I would find you here in Texas. And the moment I saw you for the first time, when Donny was following you, I knew you were the woman I'd come to find. Don't ask me how I knew. I just did."

The look on her beautiful face mingled eagerness and tenderness as she smiled up at him. "Thank you for being honest with me. Yes, you can court me as long as my father agrees."

Even in the midst of their dreadful situation, Rory felt a sense of happiness he'd never felt before. As if something beautiful and wonderful had blossomed despite the ugliness and violence. Good had risen above evil. Because good is far more powerful than evil.

Jessica startled, and her hands tensed and squeezed his as the Devils began firing again.

"Keep loading and stay down," he told her.

"Stay safe," she told him.

Rory resumed firing toward the outlaws, as did Alexander and Jack, while Baldy tended to Mr. Harrison, who was now sitting down propped up against a wall further into the cave.

"How long will our ammunition hold up?" Alexander asked. "I've been sharing mine with Jack, and I'm down to a dozen pieces of lead."

"I'm sorry I didn't bring more ammunition," Jack said. "But I never needed much before."

Rory grimaced when he reached for his own lead pouch and realized how light it was. "I'm getting low too. Baldy, how about you?"

Baldy pried open his shot pouch and poured the remaining lead

into his palm. "Six shots." He sighed heavily as he poured the precious lead back into his pouch.

"We need to stop firing until we can hit what we're firing at," Rory said with a glance toward the doctor. "Baldy, do you agree?"

Baldy was helping Mr. Harrison to lie down. The doctor put a blanket under Harrison's head and laid an ear against the man's chest. After a moment, he said, "Rest now."

Then Baldy strode toward Rory and Jessica. "Yes, I agree." He knelt to one knee in front of Jessica and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Jessica, your father is very weak. That's why I made him lie down. We'll have to fight on without him."

"What's wrong with him?" she asked. "He didn't lose that much blood."

Baldy swallowed before he answered. "It's his heart. The heartbeat is irregular, and his pulse is weak. I don't have the medicine he needs with me."

Jessica's eyes watered, and she chewed on her lower lip.

Now Rory truly wanted to hug her. When Jessica turned toward him choking back a cry of fear, he let go of his rifle and took hold of her enveloping her in his arms. He didn't want to give her false hope about her father, so he just hugged her.

Jessica gulped hard, and her clamped lips imprisoned a sob. He could tell she was trying to stay strong in a situation that was testing them all.

With regret, he released her a few moments later. He needed to focus on defending all of them.

Baldy wiped his sweat-covered head with a handkerchief and looked as though he were thinking. He glanced back into the cave. "Jessica," he said, "do you think you could take this knife and pry open those crates back there? See if you can find ammunition?"

Jessica nodded and took the knife.

"Stay as low as you can," Rory cautioned her.

With a look of determination, Jessica hurried further into the cave toward the remaining crates. Rory had to admire her

willingness to help. Lesser women would be whimpering and huddled in fear by now. Worse, some would have swooned at the first hint of danger.

“Jack, go help Jessica,” Baldy directed as he made his way toward Mr. Harrison again.

Rory prayed Jessica and Jack would find lead and powder too, which would soon also run low.

Jack hurried to help Jessica. Well used to opening heavy crates at the Harrisons’ store, Rory heard them rapidly opening crate after crate. The two of them shoved the crates aside as they were opened, causing many to spill rifles onto the cave floor.

They would soon be engulfed in rifles and yet might not be able to defend themselves. Rifles were much like men, he thought, they were powerless without a strength that came from within.

He vowed to muster that strength to get Jessica and her father to safety. Within him, a deep desire to protect her, from not just this but all threats, gripped his heart. He had to find a way out of this mess.

Baldy had already checked the back of the cave to see if there was another way out. He’d found nothing but blackened solid stone and bats. Perhaps they could sneak out under the cover of darkness if there were enough clouds to cover the full moon. The last night of their journey, he’d gazed up at a moon bright enough to light up the otherwise dark night. Then, he’d thought the moon was a glowing beauty in the sky. Tonight, he prayed that beauty would be cloaked behind clouds.

While Jessica and Jack searched for ammunition, even among the whiskey crates, Rory kept a careful watch on the open area in case one of the desperados tried to sneak up to the cave. The shots coming toward them seemed to slow again and then ceased, likely because Rory and the others weren’t firing back. He worried that they were up to something.

As each crate was opened, with no ammunition found, Rory’s hope dwindled. When he heard the whoosh of two flaming arrows

and saw them hit the wagon, he battled despair with all that was within him.

He would not give up.

Sam and his two brothers decided to go into town to see what Rory and Alexander were up to, expecting to share a noon meal and an ale or two with the boys and continue their reunion celebration.

Instead, they soon found themselves racing toward trouble.

All they knew from speaking with a frantic Melly was that Rory, Alexander, Baldy, and a young woman named Jessica, had all gone in search of her father, Mr. Harrison, who may have been abducted. And the likely abductor was a young man spurned by Jessica. A store clerk named Jack was also missing. The situation puzzled Sam and could only mean one thing. Trouble.

Past that, they had no idea what to expect as Sam, Bear, and Stephen hurried down the winding trail Melly told them to take that ran alongside a creek. When they reached the end of the trail, the narrow wagon road forked around a large stream-fed pond. They studied the ground looking for the tracks of Rory's and Alexander's horses, but if they had been there, the tracks had been trampled by at least a dozen other horses and a wagon.

Then, to their right in the distance, they heard multiple rifles being fired. The booming sounds sent Sam's heart racing. He turned and galloped Steel up a winding incline toward the sound of the gunfire.

Stephen and Bear raced their mounts closely behind him.

His entire life, Sam had made it a habit to listen to his instinct. As warning spasms of alarm erupted within him, his instinct told

him his son was in trouble. Big trouble. If something happened to Rory, he would never forgive himself. And neither would his wife, Catherine, because this journey had been his idea. He'd only half-listened to Rory's strong objections to this trip. Rory had argued that Texas was too unsettled. That the journey might prove to be dangerous. Had his son been right?

His back muscles tensed and grew rock hard with worry. He should never have brought his son and nephew to a place as wild as Texas. He and Bear had wanted to make one more journey to prove themselves once again. Had they only proved that they were sentimental old fools?

Sam suddenly caught a whiff of smoke on the breeze and slowed Steel to a fast walk. They were close. He tugged on Steel's reins and slowed even more as they neared a large opening in the brush surrounded by craggy limestone cliffs and roughhewn boulders. His eyes widened as a burning arrow sailed across the open area and hit the side of an already flaming wagon parked in front of what looked like a cave entrance. The wagon's wood was also seriously pockmarked and splintered from lead. It appeared as though whoever was holed up in that cave had suffered a tremendous onslaught.

Then, for a split second, he spotted Rory as his son fired a rifle across the clearing. The shot was followed by one from Alexander. They must have taken shelter in the cave.

Their shots were returned tenfold. That meant there was a good size band attacking them. His heart clenched as he realized Rory and the others were most likely under Indian attack.

He turned in the saddle and signaled Stephen and Bear for silence. They slowed their horses and walked them forward until they were positioned on either side of Steel.

Sam continued to peer into the cave. "They're trapped in that cave," he said in a low voice only they could hear. "I saw Rory and Alexander firing their rifles."

Bear exhaled with relief. "They're alive, at least."

Sam nodded. "That wagon's been hit with flaming arrows coming from over there." He pointed to their right. "Most likely, there are Indians behind those boulders and trees. Whoever they are, they want something or someone in that cave."

Bear nodded and whispered, "The way yonder wagon is burnin', they'll be breathin' smoke inside that cave soon if they're na already."

"We must hurry!" Stephen said. "Let's come up behind whoever has them pinned down. They'll be focused on the cave entrance, and we should be able to surprise them."

"I don't like the idea of ambushing them from behind," Sam said, "but my son and Alexander are under attack. That means I'll do whatever I must to save them."

"Their backsides will be facin' us because their frontsides are attackin' our sons," Bear said. "We'll kill them back, front, side, or up their arse."

"Let's go save them!" Stephen said.

Sam nodded. "Bear, while you tie our horses down that trail, I'll work my way over to the far side. Stephen, you come up the middle. And Bear, after you've tied the horses, you take this side."

Bear unfastened his favored weapon, a hatchet. "Aye," he agreed. "When ye're ready to surprise them, use our old bird call."

With a tip of his head, Sam yanked out his knife and took off. He could throw it faster than he could aim and shoot a pistol. Stephen held a long-barreled pistol in each hand. They crouched down and entered the woods, each taking a slightly different route.

As Sam stealthily made his way through the heavy brush and tall pines, he counted a total of ten rough-looking Americans, Mexicans, and Indians with their backs to him. Leaning against tree trunks and boulders, they reminded him of vultures resting after a meal. There was no doubt in his mind that they were a gang of vicious desperados.

The carrion eaters of mankind.

Predators of the worst kind.

As proof of their wickedness, he heard some of them talking as he crept by, hidden in the shadows of the trees.

“Do you think el capitán will let us have the girl too after he’s done with her?” He made a crude hip movement and smiled at the fellow next to him.

“Na, he’ll take her for himself. But after that, if she’s pretty, I bet he’ll want to save her to sell into slavery. To a Mexican comandante or even to a Comanche chief.”

“Maybe he’ll give us that boy,” the first fellow said.

The other fellow snickered disgustingly.

Sam’s revulsion nearly made him gag as he silently moved on.

Each of the outlaws held rifles and were in a position to fire upon the cave. Several Indians also held bows. One of the men, his eyes closed and his face grimacing, held a bloodied hand against his shoulder. He didn’t hold a rifle.

That meant the odds were three to one. Not bad. He and his brothers had faced far worse odds in the past. And they had the time-honored element of surprise.

More importantly, they would be fighting for something precious—the lives of family. That would make him, Bear, and Stephen especially fierce. Because nothing angered them more than threats to their family.

When he reached the far side of the outlaws, Sam took a position as high and close to the cave as possible hoping to see his son. His heart clenched when he caught a brief glimpse of Rory and Alexander as they peered into the open area. The flames on the wagon were growing larger, and he heard coughing coming from inside the cave. There was no time to waste. It was time to save his son. And the others.

He prayed that God would see justice done by his hand and by his brothers. From the cover of a large tree, Sam gave the signal three times.

The breeze shifted, and more smoke wafted into the cave. Ordinarily, Rory loved smelling the smoky vapor of wood-burning. At home, there was something comforting about watching their hearth burn the wood split by his axe. During their journey, over cook fires, the aroma was part of the seasoning of their food.

But now, the smoke only carried the scent of danger.

“We’re going to die,” Jessica said. Her voice cracked with hopelessness and the choking smoke.

He went over to her and handed her his bandanna. “No, we’re not going to die! Don’t give up. Tie this over your nose and mouth,” Rory told her. He understood how she felt. But he refused to give in to fear. He couldn’t, not for his sake, but hers.

He marched back to the front of the cave and stood as close as possible to the wagon, as did Alexander. As they tried not to choke on the smoke, they kept an eye out for any of the Devils. The heat from the flames was becoming unbearable.

The sad, haunting notes of the Mourning Dove he just heard still lingered in his mind. Did it portend their deaths? Would he ever see his father again? Before they left Kentucky, he would never have thought that he could love and respect his father more. But he did. They’d grown even closer on their journey, and the thought of never seeing Father again ripped at his heart.

Jessica rushed over to him. Unsteady, she leaned lightly into him. “Baldy says Father’s not doing well at all,” she sobbed into his chest. “He may not make it!”

He held her close, trying to give her courage and comfort. Trying to give them both strength. Why did their first day together have to be like this? Filled with danger and sorrow and potential loss.

Suddenly, he cocked his head toward the cave entrance. He heard the mournful coo-OO-oo sound three times! A smile spread across his face as he rejoiced in the woeful sound. The Mourning Dove wasn’t signaling death. It was signaling life!

Sensing his excitement, Jessica tilted her smoke and tear-

streaked face toward his, searching his eyes.

“We’re saved!” he declared.

Alexander nodded. “Aye, we are!” he said through the bandanna he’d tied across his face. “I heard it three times too!”

“My God, you’re right!” Baldy said, hurrying toward them. “It was faint, but I heard it too. The Mourning Dove signal.”

“What do you mean we’re saved?” Jessica asked.

“They’re out there!” Alexander said. “They’ve come to help!”

“The gates of hell are about to open,” Baldy said as more smoke drifted into the cave. “To welcome those Devils in.”

“I don’t understand,” Jessica said.

“My father!” Rory said. “And Alexander’s father. And our Uncle Stephen. Three coo sounds for three brothers. It’s their signal. They use that bird’s song because it’s loud and can be heard from a distance.”

“But three men can’t save us against ten,” Jessica said.

Their faces blackened by smoke, Rory and Alexander both smiled knowingly at each other.

“Those three can,” Baldy said.

Sam and his brothers were three doves about to dispense a form of frontier justice that was anything but peaceful. Sometimes peace can only come after violence. This would be one of those times. He steeled himself and gripped his knife even tighter. He snuck up behind the man closest to him.

At the last second, sensing Sam’s presence, the man turned toward him and swung his rifle around.

Sam slashed his blade across the bandit’s throat. The man crumpled in a heap at his moccasined feet.

Sam moved on, furtively making his way to the next outlaw, a portly Mexican. The man untied his pants and turned to relieve himself. Sam thrust his blade into the man’s right side where the

liver was. The wound would cause the man to bleed to death in moments.

The third man heard him coming, turned, raised his rifle, and fired.

Sam ducked and rolled, sprang up, and snatched the rifle out of the man's hands. Using the rifle as a club, he whacked the man under the chin and then clubbed him over the head. The man's eyes rolled back in his head as he collapsed.

The rifle shot had alerted the other gang members, and they were all shouting now. They were also all dying. One by one, in quick succession, Stephen and Bear picked off the six remaining desperados.

As Sam reached them, only one man was left alive. The wounded one.

A snarling hatchet-bearing man of Bear's size caused the criminal to readily give up. "I surrender," he told Bear.

"I'll deal with him," Sam told Stephen and Bear. "You two get our horses and go pull that wagon away from the cave."

Bear and Stephen took off running, back toward the horses.

Sam's bloodied blade gripped in his hand, and his jaw clenched in anger, he strode up to the wounded man who sat leaning against a boulder. He looked tall and lanky, whittled down by a life on the run.

"Who are you? And why are you trying to kill my son?" Sam demanded. "And I'd better hear nothing but the truth."

With a look of utter disbelief, the man peered around at the scattered bodies. In a defeated voice, he said, "I'm Andrew Astley, and those were my men. We are...were...known as the Tejano Devils. We were here to make a deal for rifles and whiskey."

The man's English accent stirred wartime memories in Sam. Terrible memories that evoked even more anger within him. As a young captain, he'd sent too many good men to their deaths fighting the English during the Revolution. "Who were you going to deal with? I know it wasn't my son. Tell me his name."

“Donny Farley, the banker’s son. He’s dead, but we didn’t kill him, although I’d planned to. When we arrived, Donny was already a pile of broken bones and battered flesh. So I was denied the pleasure of sending that pompous ass to his grave.” He grimaced as he sat up straighter. “I still want to make that deal, Sir. I have gold. Lots of it. Trade with me. I’ll leave you in peace and you’ll be a wealthy man.”

“I’m already a wealthy man. But give me the gold,” Sam said with an icy gaze at Astley.

Astley reached into his silk waistcoat and handed him two hefty pouches.

Sam opened one of the pouches and peered inside. “Well, what a surprise. Your gold appears to be tainted,” he said with a heavy dose of sarcasm. “It’s stained with the blood of innocents. So I’ll be sure this goes to the local orphanage.”

Astley gasped, and hatred hovered in the Brit’s gray eyes. “We had a deal!”

“I never make deals with the devil. Stand up!” Sam ordered.

Across the clearing, Rory and the others had heard pistol shots and the sounds of men struggling and dying. Then it grew quiet, and they waited eagerly to catch a glimpse of his father and uncles. He prayed all three had survived what had to be a horrific battle with the hardened criminals. Despite his confidence in the three, a flicker of apprehension coursed through him.

He glanced at Rory. His cousin's expression was taut and somber, as they both awaited some sign of their fathers and uncle.

Baldy came up behind him. "We need to move Mr. Harrison further into the cave. He can't breathe this smoke even a minute longer."

Rory nodded. "Jack, take my position next to Alexander. I'll help Baldy move Mr. Harrison."

Then Rory saw Uncle Bear and Uncle Stephen, each wielding a rope, galloping toward the burning wagon. Where was his father? Rory's jaw and stomach tightened. Had Father been wounded?

Or...God forbid.

He could barely breathe as his lungs filled with the heaviness of worry. Then his heart stopped when Jessica screamed.

"Pa!" Her terror-filled shriek echoed in the depths of the cave.

Rory and Baldy both rushed toward her.

"Father, no!" she sobbed. "No!"

Rory took hold of her shaking shoulders and lifted her to him as Baldy knelt to examine Mr. Harrison.

An interminable moment later, Baldy glanced up with sorrow-

filled eyes. "I'm sorry, Jessica."

Sam glanced toward the cave at the sound of a woman's scream. Was there another threat? A wild animal or something?

"Get down there," he told the gang's leader. "And hurry."

As they made their way through the boulders and trees, Sam caught sight of Bear and Stephen's horses pulling the wagon well away from the entrance.

Leaping over burning lumber and coals, Alexander emerged first and ran toward his father.

Bear flung himself off of Whiskey and wrapped his son in his big arms.

Sam kept his pistol on Astley as they hurried across the clearing.

A young, skinny man Sam didn't recognize emerged from the cave next. He hung his head and seemed to be weeping.

"What's happened?" Sam asked Alexander as Stephen joined them.

"Jessica's father, Mr. Harrison," Alexander said, "the smoke must have been too much for him. Baldy said it was his heart."

The young fellow said, "I'm Jack, one of Mr. Harrison's clerks. He was such a fine man. All this was just too much for him." Barely able to speak, he added, "Jessica will be devastated. The whole town will be." He shook his head slowly and choked back tears.

Sam's anger flared again. He turned toward Astley and smacked the Englishman's chin with his pistol. "You caused a good man to die."

"I didn't bring that old man here," Astley grumbled as he held his bleeding jaw.

"But you ordered your Indian friends to send burning arrows at us," Alexander snarled as his face grew red with anger. "And your

gang of outlaws fired hundreds of shots at us. All in the name of profit, you rotten, maggot of a man!”

Baldy rushed out of the cave, his teeth bared, and his fists clenched. He marched straight up to Astley and hurled his right fist into the man’s jaw, knocking him flat. “You bastard!” the doctor spat. He glanced at Sam. “Which one of us gets to kill him?”

The Englishman sprang up and lunged toward Baldy. On his uninjured side, he held a blade he must have pulled from his boot.

“Watch out!” Sam yelled.

Baldy’s right arm blocked the knife, which caused the blade to slice into his forearm. Angered, Baldy pivoted his hip and used a left hook to land a blow to the side of Astley’s jaw, causing the man’s head to spin.

Holding his injured arm, Baldy backed up and yelled, “Drop that blade!”

Instead, Astley shook the dizziness out of his head and made to throw his knife at Baldy.

Sam whipped out his blade, and Stephen withdrew his pistol. Bear’s hatchet, already clutched in his fist, struck Astley between the shoulder blades and sunk deep into the Englishman’s flesh.

The man plummeted to the ground face first.

Baldy stared at the dead man. “My thanks, Bear.” Looking down at his own wound, he frowned and said, “That’s going to need stitches.”

“Where’s Rory?” Sam asked. “With Jessica?”

Baldy nodded. “She’s understandably distraught, but I think Rory will be able to provide her with some comfort. Jack, will you please retrieve my medical bag?”

“Yes, Sir,” Jack said and left.

Sam frowned as he applied pressure to Baldy’s wound.

“Rory and Jessica have grown very close over the course of this nightmarish ordeal,” Baldy said. He gritted his teeth against the pain. “Not so hard, Sam.”

“Close? We’ve only been in town for a day,” Sam said.

“And how long did it take ye to fall for Catherine? ‘Twas about five minutes if I recall,” Bear said.

Baldy looked him in the eye. “She’s a fine young woman, Sam. If I were you, I’d prepare for a new daughter-in-law.”

“He’s right,” Alexander said. “She’s the woman Rory came here to find. She’s exactly as he described her to me. She’s perfect for him.”

Jack returned with the medical bag and opened it for Baldy. “Is the rest of the gang dead?” he asked. His reddened eyes still sparkled with tears, but he seemed to be collecting himself.

Baldy withdrew a roll of bandages from the bag and handed it to Sam.

Having dressed many battlefield wounds, Sam knew what to do. “They are indeed dead,” he told Jack as he wrapped Baldy’s wound. “The Devils will no longer prey upon Texians.”

“Thanks to three men from Kentucky,” Alexander said.

Stephen grinned at that. “I guess I’m still a Kentuckian.”

“You’re still a Wyllie,” Sam said.

Jessica forced herself to stand. She tore her gaze away from her father with a choking cry.

Leaning on Rory’s arm, she made her way toward the others and the fresh air that had come too late for her father. Although tears still ran from her eyes like rainfall, she had stopped sobbing hysterically. Pa would want her to be strong and of good courage. She reached deep inside herself and mustered the strength to face a world without the man who had been her rock.

“Please take my father and me home,” she told Rory.

“Of course. We’ll use the gang’s wagon and carry your father in the back.”

She squinted her sore eyes as they stepped into the daylight, freed at last. Rory picked her up and carried her over the

smoldering wood and chunks of rock that littered the ground in front of the cave. He sat her down in front of the others.

“Jessica,” Rory said, gently taking her elbow, “this is my father, Captain Sam Wyllie, and my Uncle Bear MacKay.”

In a daze, she could only nod at the two.

“We are indeed sorry for your loss,” Captain Wyllie told her. “Whatever we can do to help you, just ask.”

“Aye,” Mr. MacKay said. “Consider us yer family.”

Family? The word reminded her that she had no family now. She was all alone in the world.

As if Rory read her mind, he said, “My family and I will be by your side through all of this. You are not alone.”

She glanced toward the cave entrance. “Someone, please bring my father out of that hell hole.”

Mr. MacKay inclined his chin toward Alexander, and they immediately left to retrieve her father.

“I’ll find a blanket for him,” Stephen said.

She noticed the doctor’s bloodied and bandaged arm. “You’re hurt.”

Baldy nodded. “Melly will patch me up as soon as we get back.”

“The Devils?” she asked.

“All dead,” Captain Wyllie said.

She glanced around them, her thoughts jagged and raw. She grimaced when she saw the leader of the gang lying face down with an axe in his back. Donny’s body had been moved off to the side. The bodies of the rest of the gang would be strewn across the forest floor. So much death. Most appalling of all, her father, gone to heaven too soon. All because Donny thought to make himself a rich man at the expense of others.

Captain Wyllie retrieved a canteen and a blanket from one of their horses and offered the water to her. “Drink and then sit down and rest.” He spread the blanket out on the ground.

No wonder Rory was so kind. His father was. She swallowed the water with gratitude and used some to wash her face of the

soot. Then exhausted and grief-stricken, she sank onto the blanket.

Rory also drank, washed his eyes, and then sat down too. He took her hand and squeezed it. "We'll get through this together."

His words and his touch gave her comfort. But when Alexander and his father carried her father out, the sight of his lifeless body made her stiffen in shock. Horror-struck, every bone and every muscle in her body hardened. And when they loaded him in the wagon and then covered him with a blanket, wave after wave of grief and despair rolled through her. She wept quietly, rocking back and forth, for a long time.

Finally, Rory said, "Jessica, we should get you back to town before long. Are you strong enough to take your father back?"

She nodded and then glanced up at Captain Wyllie, Stephen Wyllie, and Mr. MacKay, who all stood behind Rory. "Thank you for rescuing us. Rory never gave up hope." She hung her head and whispered, "But I did."

"Faith is the hope of things unseen," Baldy said.

With Buck tied to the back, Rory pulled the wagon up to the back of Harrison's store.

Jessica glanced back at her father's body with a look of hopelessness and depression. Tears streamed down her face like rain.

Uncle Stephen kindly suggested that Jessica bury her father at a peaceful spot on his place.

After a moment, Jessica readily agreed, saying she didn't want her Pa's resting place to be anywhere near where Donny would likely be buried at the town's cemetery.

Jessica hadn't wanted to face the people in town just yet, so Bear and Alexander agreed to remain in town for a while to tell the sheriff all that had happened. Baldy said he needed to be there too to vouch for what they said.

Afterward, he would have Melly stitch up his arm. Then Baldy and Melly would go to the Tyler home to inform Rebecca and her parents of Mr. Harrison's death. They would come to the Wyllie's place tomorrow morning so that Baldy could conduct the funeral service

Jack volunteered to keep the store running along with the other clerk. Jessica instructed him to put the store's income in the safe every night. And, having earned her trust that day as he fought to defend them, she gave him the combination.

After Jessica packed a bag, Rory put it in the wagon, and they started to leave town for the ten-mile trip to the Wyllie homestead.

“Wait,” Jessica said and ran back up the stairs.

When she returned, she carried a quilt. “My mother made this. Pa kept it on his bed because it reminded him of her. Will you wrap him in it before he’s buried?”

“Yes, of course,” Rory said. “It’s very beautiful.” He knew that the harsh realities of pioneer life were often softened by the beauty and warmth found in lovingly stitched quilts. Unfortunately, those harsh realities included death.

With Jessica holding the precious quilt and sitting next to him, Rory drove the wagon that carried her father’s body. For Jessica’s privacy sake, they took a route that skirted around the town. Uncle Stephen led the way, and his father and Uncle Bear provided an escort on both sides of the wagon.

Few words were spoken by any of them. Jessica gazed ahead in despair, her grief palatable and her face wet with the bitter tears of sorrow. He shifted the reins into his left hand and wrapped his right arm around her shoulders. Her head lowered, and her body slumped against him as deep sobs racked her.

Rory’s own heart hurt for her, and he felt a wretchedness he had never experienced before. Terrible regrets assailed him. Could he have done something different to spare Mr. Harrison the ordeal he experienced? Why had God sent him to Jessica on this particular day? A day filled with suffering. He wasn’t sure. But if there was any way for him to help her, to ease her grief, he would. He would try to give her what she had given him. Hope.

Exhausted and sorrowful, after a solemn light meal, they all stood from the table to retire early. Before she went to bed, Jessica asked if Rory and his cousins could put her father in the ground at sunrise.

“I can’t watch him being covered in dirt,” she said in a choked voice and shaking her head, “but I’ll be there for Baldy’s service.”

Rory nodded, his heart breaking for her. “I understand. Get some rest.”

At dawn, Rory and his Texas cousins took turns digging the

grave. Then the four of them used ropes to lower Mr. Harrison's body into the ground before covering him with earth and a layer of stones. When they finished, Alexander and Bear marked the grave with a beautifully carved, large wooden cross they had worked on all morning.

As Rory stared at the cross, he thought about life and death. Like a leaf, a body falls to the ground. But like water, the spirit rises to the sky.

Bear stood, dusted the soil off his hands, and then folded them. "I didna have the privilege of knowin' ye, Sir. And that I regret. But I'll be lookin' for ye when I join ye in heaven. Until then, rest assured, yer wee lass, Jessica will be well protected." He glanced at Rory. "I know that ye will keep my promise."

"I intend to, Uncle," Rory said.

Then mid-morning, the women of the family brought Jessica out for the burial service. Her mourning attire was as heavy and dark as grief itself. He hated seeing her beautiful hair and face covered in a sheer veil.

The entire family and many townspeople gathered under the ancient and spreading oak tree. Rory stood next to Jessica and offered his arm for support. When she placed her hand around his elbow, he could feel her trembling, and the glazed look of grief marred her beautiful face.

Baldy cleared his throat bringing the mourners to a respectful silence before he began speaking.

"Jessica, we are sorry for your loss, but remember that for Christians, death is nothing at all. Your father has only slipped away to his next home—a mansion in heaven. He is still your father, and you are still his daughter. What you were to each other, you will always be. Let his name come easily to you. Let memories of him bring warmth to your heart without shadow or pain. And speak to him in the easy way that you always did, with no difference in your manner, no sorrow, or regrets. Smile when you think of him. And pray for him as you always did. He is waiting for

you, unseen, but not unfelt, because his spirit is not lost. His memory lives within you and his soul is with Christ. Rest assured, he is infinitely happier.

“And Jessica, your father was a brave, kind man, admired by all who knew him. He would want you to be brave as well. And he would want you to be happy. I know, if he could, he would tell you to seize life—make it all it can be—and embrace love when it comes your way with all of your beautiful spirit.”

After a closing prayer, everyone sought Jessica out to give her their condolences. Rory kept an eye on those coming up to her. Noticeably absent, according to Uncle Stephen, were all the bank employees. Mr. Farley had a burial of his own.

Several people had brought copies of that morning’s newspaper, which reported that the sheriff and a few of his helpers had buried the bodies of the Tejano Devils in a mass grave. The front page told the story of their demise giving credit to the ‘older’ gentlemen who were visitors from Kentucky and their brother Stephen Wyllie. For ridding the Province of the vicious gang, the three were hailed as heroes, which Rory and Alexander already knew.

After Harrison’s burial, everyone gathered for a meal outdoors. Rebecca’s parents, the Tylers, had brought their maid and cook to the Wyllie’s place to help out. Cousins Samuel, Steve, and Thomas roasted a side of beef outdoors, and many of the townspeople had brought dishes to contribute to the feast.

Jessica ate little and spoke even less, staying under a tree on a blanket with Rebecca. When Rory attempted to bring her a dessert, she shook her head at him. Disappointment filled him until she tapped the blanket next to her, signaling that he should join them.

“That was a meaningful message Baldy gave, wasn’t it?” he said as he sat down.

“It was,” Rebecca agreed.

“And the cross that Uncle Bear and Alexander carved is extraordinary,” he said.

Rebecca nodded. “It is. And that spot where you dug the grave

is so lovely and peaceful.”

“It is,” he agreed.

He and Rebecca both glanced at each other and then at Jessica. Unable to speak, Jessica swallowed and looked as though she were struggling to keep her volatile emotions in check.

“I know you’re hurting,” he told her. “Can I help you in any way?”

Jessica shook her head and swiped at a tear. “Just being near is help.”

Rory’s heart went out to her. Not just a part of it, but all of it.

The next few days passed by in a blur as Jessica grieved. Melly and Rebecca rarely left her side, and Louisa joined them as often as her duties as a mother would permit her. Cousin Thomas' wife, Abigail also joined the ladies quite often. But since the couple lived in another home on the farm, she was not there as often.

Rory found it difficult to find even a moment alone with Jessica, and he was growing frustrated. He wanted to comfort her beyond a few words of condolences. He wanted to express how much he already cared for her. Occasionally, their gazes locked, and they shared their feelings with their eyes or a squeeze of the hand. As much as he thought he saw in her eyes or felt in the warmth of her hand, he wanted more. Much more.

He had to speak to her alone, and soon. He knew grief could be a long, ugly storm. He couldn't slow the rain of tears for her; he couldn't stop the winds of sorrow; he wouldn't even think of looking for a blue sky. Not until she was ready to see it. But he could let her know that he would hold her close until the storm passed.

He and Alexander passed most of their time with their cousins learning about cattle. The three of them were a wealth of information, and the seasoned cattlemen soon earned their respect. The grueling work of caring for cattle wasn't for the faint of heart. All three of their cousins possessed superior riding, roping, and herding skills and bore the signs of the tough life that raising cattle brought. Each had earned their share of broken ribs, had calloused

hardened hands, and often endured bruises and scrapes inflicted by a charging steer or an ornery cow. But they'd learned to stay well away from bulls and advised Rory and Alexander to do the same.

Rory was able to share his knowledge of horses with them and describe how he and Little John had helped their father develop one of the most respected horse farms in Kentucky. Steve was particularly interested, especially in their breeding program. And Alexander, at Bear's suggestion, gave Uncle Stephen and Samuel suggestions for keeping the cattle and horse operation's bookkeeping in order.

Today the morning was unusually cool, and the expansive Texas sky cloudless, so they decided it was time for some fun. They would have two horse races. Samuel and Steve had created a large oval dirt track to exercise and train their horses on, and they would hold the races there. Only the men in the family and the cowhands gathered for the race. Jessica was still cloistered with the women.

As they gathered for the race, Alexander asked their Texas cousins, "Have you heard the tale of the runaway horse?"

The three shook their heads.

Grinning from ear to ear, Alexander said, "It's a terrible tale of whoa!"

Samuel and Steve laughed.

"I don't get it," Thomas said.

"Whoa, not woe," Rory spelled out. "The latter spelling means something sad."

"You'll be telling a tale of woe after I beat you," Steve said.

"Are you running in the race, or is your horse?" Rory replied with a half-grin.

"Stardust is going to beat your gelding," Steve countered. "But if that's not enough, I'll run a leg race against you."

"Let's just stick to horse racing," Rory said. "I'm still a little bow-legged after that eight-hundred-mile ride."

"How about gelding against gelding for the first race," Samuel

suggested. "And then stallion against stallion, Father against Uncle Sam for the second race?"

"Aye!" Bear said. "Now, there are two races I'd like to see." He took a long sip of whiskey from his flask.

Rory checked Buck's leathers and then mounted. Soon he lined Buck alongside Stardust, Steve's handsome bay. "Good luck, cousin," he said.

"I won't need it," Steve said with a good-natured smile.

After Alexander's signal, they took off. Rory leaned forward, almost floating, as Buck moved under him. He could feel Buck's muscles as they bunched up and then released each time the gelding's hooves hit the ground. Buck's long mane hairs licked at his face to the rhythmic motion of his head.

Rory knew Father and Alexander would be cheering for him, but all he could hear was the rush of the wind past his ears as he let his body follow the horse's motion.

For most of the race, Buck maintained a solid lead. The buckskin sure loved to run, and Rory felt honored to share the moment with him.

At the last, though, Stardust pulled ahead over the buckskin.

Steve whooped with joy at his victory as did his two brothers.

"I want a rematch as soon as Buck gets rested up from our long journey," Rory said, still breathing hard.

Steve grinned. "Anything you say, cousin. But maybe it's you that needs to get rested up."

In the second race, Uncle Stephen's stallion, George would run against Father's stallion, Steel.

Uncle Stephen led his tall, kingly stallion out from a green sea of grass. His black coat glittered in the sunlight as he marched toward them, head held high and proud, just like his owner. The stallion's silky mane flowed off his neck and shoulders in an inky black waterfall. His long tail waved proudly, swatting at the flies that dared to bother him. The stallion walked with the confidence of a stud horse, and his muscles stood out under his glossy black

coat.

Rory doubted a more magnificent horse existed in all of Texas. Although he favored Steel because his family had raised him from a colt.

As Uncle Stephen saddled his horse, George looked Steel in the eyes as if to challenge him. Steel answered with a rumbling and derisive sounding snort that made Father and Rory laugh. With a shake of his big head, the young stallion seemed to say that he expected to prevail over the older challenger.

Also a splendid black stallion of stunning appearance, Steel was an offspring of George, the last colt bred out of George before Stephen left for Texas with his magnificent horse.

The race for the stronger stallions would be three laps, a lap longer than Rory's race.

Just before the race started, his father told Stephen, "Well brother, I guess we will see which is the winner—the older brother on a younger horse, or the *baby* brother on an older horse."

When they all stopped chuckling, Bear said, "Either way, ye're both winners."

The horses sprang off hips bulging with muscles. Ridden by two life-toughened middle-aged men, the two powerful stallions thundered around the track, their legs a blur and their manes wafting in the wind.

Most everyone held their breath. A fall from either horse at this speed could be serious, even deadly. But men like his father and uncle who'd ridden a thousand miles just getting to Kentucky and another eight-hundred getting to Texas didn't fall from horses. They were first-rate horsemen. Men who had roped their dreams from the back of a horse.

Rory's heart raced too as he and Alexander cheered father on while cousins Samuel, Steve, and Thomas cheered for their father.

In between gulps from his flask, Uncle Bear seemed to be cheering for both of his brothers. "Aye, that's showin' these youngins how to ride a horse," Bear bellowed to them.

Also watching were Hollis Connally, Wyllie Cattle and Horse Company's foreman and cowhands Billy, Pete, Zack, Nate, Jack, Ray, Hunter, and Shane. They all cheered for Uncle Stephen, of course.

It was the most exciting race Rory had ever witnessed. By the third lap, a foamy sweat seeped from the horses' mouths and sizzled on their broad chests.

Father thrust his jaw forward and leaned down on Steel's neck, trying to gain on Stephen.

George seemed to gather all of his remaining energy, and in a gigantic leap, Uncle Stephen flew him across the finish line a good nose ahead of Steel and Father.

Cheers and congratulations rang out as the two brothers, bantering lightheartedly and teasing each other, rode another lap to gradually slow the stallions racing hearts.

The older horse had proven himself to his younger offspring. Just as Father had done with Rory. And as Uncle Bear had done with Alexander. On this journey, Father and Bear proved themselves against younger rivals three times. Once against the robbers, once against the Indians, and once against the Devils. And they'd shown Rory and Alexander that the ability to be victorious wasn't determined by age, but rather by courage and experience.

Rory could only marvel at his father and uncles. He turned to Alexander. "You know, that race with a sire put up against his offspring, reminded me that we came on this journey to protect our fathers. In truth, it's been the other way around. It makes me ashamed of my youthful arrogance."

Alexander shook his head. "Nay, 'twas not arrogance. Just youthful confidence. Something of which ye have a goodly measure."

Rory glanced back at the house. Despite all their recent troubles and the tragedy of losing Mr. Harrison, he was still confident that Jessica was meant to be his. It was time to make that happen. He was inclined to skip over the customary courting period. Nothing

about their relationship had been normal. She was now a woman alone who would be living and grieving in a rough frontier town. And he didn't want her to be alone. He wanted her by his side, where he could protect her. Console her. That's where she belonged. Because he knew one thing for certain—he loved her.

Growing restless while Jessica was in mourning, Rory began taking long rides to think about what was in store for the two of them. As he rode, the fresh warm breeze stirred his imagination and whispered visions of the future. And questions.

What would it be like to be married? To have children with her? To go to sleep every night with her nestled beside him and to wake up every morning to her beautiful face. With every ride, he grew even more convinced that she wasn't just the woman he'd conjured in his mind. She was so much more. Already, a tangible, real bond of love existed between them, an undeniable pull that grew stronger every time they encountered one another.

Whenever she was near, her presence kindled soul-deep feelings within him, not just pleasant daydreams in his mind.

The ordeal they'd shared had given him a profound insight into her character and strength. They could have spent weeks together courting, but he would not have learned as much about her as he did in that one day. And over the last week, as she both grieved and celebrated her father's life, sharing stories about him with everyone, Rory gained even more respect and admiration for her. When family discussions turned to concepts and topics like freedom, democracy, slavery, and Mexican politics, she was both well informed and articulate.

Despite how difficult a time this was for her, she fit right in with all of them. And as far as he could tell, his entire family had fallen in love with her, especially his cousins, who were as dazzled

by her beauty and sweet spirit as he was.

The biggest question in his mind was, would she leave Texas and return with him to Kentucky? Would it be fair to ask her to give up her life here?

After a week passed, Rebecca said goodbye and returned to her home with Steve when he quit work for the day. Melly and Baldy had returned to town several days ago.

Rory had enjoyed getting to know all of them better, but to be honest, he was glad they were all finally gone. Maybe now he would be able to spend more time with Jessica.

There was so much they needed to talk about, and despite all the amusing stories told every evening, especially by Bear, he had yet to see her really smile or hear her laugh, and he wanted to more than anything.

Tomorrow, he would take her aside and speak to her of all that was on his heart.

The next morning at breakfast, Rory sensed that Jessica's mood had changed. She seemed stronger now, and he thought he saw a spark of anger in her eyes.

Sure enough, Jessica soon tapped her plate with a fork, drawing everyone's attention, even the baby boy's. "I want to thank all of you for your kindness and support. You have made the last week more bearable for me. But it is time I returned to my duties at the store. I need to pay the clerks and see what inventory needs to be ordered. And I want to file a complaint against Mr. Farley with the Alcalde."

"Will that do any good?" Rory's father asked her.

"I don't know, Captain Wyllie. I only know I can't let him get away with what he did," Jessica said with a blaze in her eyes as intense as her fiery red hair.

Uncle Stephen nodded. "I agree. I'll file a complaint too. And

I'll go see Rebecca's father, Mr. Tyler, today and see if he'll go into town with me to also file a complaint with Alcalde Navarro. Mr. Farley tried to blackmail Jessica and her father by threatening to call their note. I won't do business with a banker like that."

"José Antonio Navarro is the recently appointed Alcalde," Steve told Rory. "He is also a lawyer."

Samuel nodded. "If anyone in Nacodogches can help Jessica, it would be him. The sheriff is nothing more than an inept figurehead."

Even though he'd only spent a few minutes with Sheriff Hanks, Rory was of the same opinion. The sheriff was a nominal leader without real power who had likely been put in the position by Mexican authorities.

"I suspect that buying all those rifles and whiskey made Donny short on cash, and that is why he was so intent on getting his hands on my father's store," Jessica said.

"Na exactly ethical bank practices," Bear said.

"There was nothing ethical about that man," Jessica said with bitterness. "Can I impose on you, Mr. Wyllie, to let me borrow a horse to take me into town?"

"You can use my mare, Texana," Louisa said. "Rory can bring her back for you, but there's no hurry. With taking care of the baby, I rarely get a chance to go riding."

Rory cleared his throat and said, "Jessica, I'll escort you into town, but first, I'd like to speak with you. Will you join me outside?"

"Yes, of course. You can come with me. I want to say goodbye to my father. I also want to say goodbye to all of you," she said with a glance around the table at everyone. "I'll never be able to repay you for your kindness."

"Kindness doesn't need to be repaid because it is freely given with love," Louisa said.

Rory stood and offered Jessica his hand to assist her out of her chair. Then he picked up the bag she must have packed earlier.

The two of them left through the front door, and Rory left the bag on the front porch. They strode toward the grave without speaking. Only the songs of birds perched overhead broke the silence.

“He would have liked this spot,” she said when they reached the gravesite. “It’s as peaceful as he was.”

“I could tell just in the short time I knew him that he was a kind, gentle man,” Rory said.

“He was. I can’t remember him ever yelling at me. His heart was kind to everyone. But his heart failed him. I miss him so much.” Tears sparkled in her eyes. “Losing him left my life in ruins.”

“I know it’s hard for you. Right now, your heart has a bleeding gash in it. But in time, your heart will heal just like all wounds do. Your life isn’t in ruins. If he’d lived, I would have asked him something.”

“What’s that?”

“I would have asked his blessing to marry you.”

Jessica’s eyes widened and shone with the brilliance of stars.

“Normally, I would have asked him to court you for a period of time. But with him gone, I don’t want you to be alone. I think we should dispense with the traditional lengthy courtship. I know you’re still grieving, and I want to be with you as you mourn. I want to be your shelter during this storm.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Do you love me?”

“I do. I believe I have from the moment I started imagining you. I know it isn’t logical, but it’s the truth. Love doesn’t have to be logical—just true.”

Jessica reached for his hands. “Rory, we just met.”

“Jessica...” he interrupted.

Tenderness welled in her eyes as she stopped him, placing a palm over his heart. “My head is telling me that I can’t possibly love someone I just met. But my heart is telling me that I’m utterly in love with you.”

“You are?” He dared to hope it was true.

“Rory, love is merely a word until you learn what it means. And you have taught me all that it means.”

Rory was quite certain there was still much more to learn, but he resisted the urge to waggle his brows and smile in amusement. He remained quiet and thoughtful as she continued.

“You’re my hero. You offered to help me, a stranger. You very smartly figured out the clues Pa left. You led me to him, enabling me to be with my father before he died and to comfort him as he drew his last breaths. You defended me against Donny and then against the Tejano Devils. You gave me hope when I had none. And then, when I was left alone, your family welcomed me into their fold as though I were one of them.”

“You are.”

She smoothed her hand over his buckskin shirt and turned her gaze up to his eyes. “Rory, I think about you constantly. Through my grief, thoughts of you being nearby kept me strong. You and your family saved me from despair. I’m so glad you came to Texas. I’m thankful you were there when I needed help. I thank God for sending my buckskin angel. Not just to guard and help me. But to love me.”

“I’m thankful too.” He reached for her and drew her into his arms. Lowering his head to hers, he kissed her, tasting her lips for the first time. For that moment in time, nothing else mattered in the world. Just the kiss. Soft and sweet, and full of ardor, he wanted to go on kissing her forever. But to protect her honor, he forced himself to release her.

“You haven’t given me an answer,” he said.

“You haven’t asked the question,” she said. Then for the first time, she gave him a whole-hearted smile, and he thought the light of heaven must have descended on them, for her smile was the richest kind of blessing.

He bent down, letting his knee touch the freshly churned soil of her father’s grave. It was his way of seeking Mr. Harrison’s blessing. “Jessica, you’re the woman I loved even before I ever saw

you. And you're everything I dreamed you'd be and more. You're the woman of not only my dreams but also my future. Will you marry me and come to live with my family in Kentucky?"

"Yes, to the first question," she said, with an even bigger smile. She glanced down at the grave. "I'll have to think about Kentucky. It would mean selling my store. Its success has always meant a lot to me, and it is all I have left of my father."

"I know that's a lot to ask," he told her.

"Could you possibly live here?" she asked hopefully.

"If it were just me, I could. But it isn't just me. At home, I have a mother, a brother, and a sister-in-law. And a niece, my brother's daughter. The sweetest little girl you'll ever meet. And in Boonesborough and Lexington, I have more uncles, William and Edward, three aunts, and more cousins than I can count. We're a very big family. You should see all of us when we get together at Christmas."

"I always wanted a big family," she said and laughed.

The sound of her laughter was joyous, and it made him want to hear it for as long as he lived. She had to understand why she needed to go with him to Kentucky. "I also need to be sure my father, Uncle Bear, and Alexander get back safely. If something happened to them on the way back, I'd never forgive myself. So, I have to go. But I also can't leave you behind. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"And I with you." She pressed her open lips to his, and they exchanged a series of slow, expressive kisses. Kisses that spoke of love, promises, and a wide-open future.

Then, hand in hand, they strolled toward the horse barn. As he saddled their mounts, Rory could tell that Jessica was anxious to leave for town. She wanted to meet with the Alcalde as soon as possible. She needed to know that Mr. Farley would be punished. So they could get going, they decided to let Rory tell everyone later of their plans to marry.

As he tied her bag to the horse, Jessica took a deep breath and

said, "There may be another reason to leave the Province. Texians won't put up with the dictatorial policies of the Mexican government, especially concerning their faith and religion. Many think there is a war brewing."

"I agree," he said. "And so do my father and uncles. Texas is beautiful country, and I can see why it would be worth fighting for. The Americans who live here have had a taste of freedom. That taste will not be forgotten."

On the way to town to see the Alcalde, Rory answered Jessica's numerous questions about Kentucky, their home there, and his family. She wanted to know about each member of his family, even his cousins, but especially his mother.

"Tell me more about your mother, Catherine," Jessica said.

Rory decided to save for later the fact that she was an extremely wealthy woman. "Mother is a beautiful, sophisticated, well-educated woman who came from a well-heeled Boston family. She was widowed on the Wilderness Road, which is where she met my father. Soon after they arrived in Boonesborough, when Uncle John was killed, they adopted his son, my older brother Little John."

"So he's actually your cousin, not your brother?"

"That's right, but I've always considered him to be a brother."

"Do you think your mother will like me?" she asked.

"I know she will. And you'll love her."

"If she's anything like you, I'm certain I will."

"She's smart, kind, affectionate, stylish, devoted, warm..."

"So she's exactly like you," she said with a happy laugh.

The Alcalde's office was surprisingly modest. And José Antonio Navarro was unexpectedly humble. His law office on North Street held a simple wood desk, a bookcase full of law books, and a few

simple rawhide chairs. He wore a white linen pullover shirt with full sleeves and a large collar, with a plain waistcoat.

With graciousness and a charming smile, he welcomed Rory and Jessica, shaking each of their hands, and then offering them chairs. He spoke with almost no Spanish accent in a refined manner.

“My deepest condolences on your recent loss,” Navarro told Rebecca. “Your father will be missed. He was one of our town’s finest citizens.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“And my thanks to you, Mr. Wyllie, for your part in defeating those Devils,” Navarro told Rory. “You and your family members have rid the Province of a terrible blight.”

They heard a knock on the door, and Navarro said, “Enter.”

It was Uncle Stephen and Mr. Tyler who’d come to file a complaint as well.

After greetings were exchanged, they also took seats.

“Alcalde, I am here to file a complaint with you regarding Mr. Farley,” Jessica said.

“As are we,” Uncle Stephen said. “He’s not fit to be our town’s banker.”

Mr. Tyler nodded his agreement. “The man is a scoundrel of the worst sort.”

Navarro raised his brows and steepled his hands under his chin. “Continue, Miss Harrison.”

Jessica explained from the beginning the unwanted courtship by Donny, her numerous attempts to rebuff him, followed by the threats by both Donny and his father to call their loan. Then they both described the abduction of her father and his clerk, the confrontation with Donny that resulted in his death, and the final battle with the Tejano Devils.

Navarro listened intently and asked a few questions. When they finished, he said, “Remarkable story.”

“My question for you, Sir,” Jessica said, “is can we press

charges against Mr. Farley and see that he pays for what he and his son did.”

Navarro frowned. “Miss Harrison, it is my opinion that you would be better off not to pursue this any further.”

“Why?” Jessica demanded.

“First, Farley has already paid dearly—with his son’s life. Second, he is not to be trusted, and I would fear for your safety. Also, I would suspect that what was said between him and you would be his word against yours. You have no witnesses to what he said or what Donny said regarding your store, do you?”

Rory guessed this was true because when he glanced at Jessica, she appeared crestfallen.

“But...” she began.

Rory was livid. “The man should not be allowed to get away with trying to extort honest business people. His son, who was no doubt acting upon his father’s plan, caused Mr. Harrison to suffer a fatal heart attack.”

Navarro held up a hand. “The most important reason you should not pursue this is that I have already begun drafting a letter to the new governor.” He tapped a document on his desk. “The Province of Texas has yet another new governor, Rafael Gonzales. I will be informing him of the irregularities in Farley’s banking practices. Not just yours, but others that I know of. Let me be the one to bring the man’s wrongdoings to the attention of the Mexican authorities. Coming from a Mexican, it will be taken more seriously.”

Rory did not doubt the truth of that statement. “What will happen to him?” he asked.

“My opinion is that José Cosío, the Comandante of the Mexican military garrison at the fort, will soon receive orders from the Governor to have his soldiers escort Mr. Farley out of Tejas.”

“That would be best for our town and its people,” Mr. Tyler said.

“What happened to all the rifles that were in the cave?” Uncle

Stephen asked.

“They were given to the soldiers at the fort,” Navarro said. “They will make good use of them.”

Rory eyed his uncle, who clenched his jaw at the news. Stephen was no doubt wondering if the rifles would eventually be used against Americans if further fuel was added to the cauldron boiling in Texas.

“And the whiskey?” Mr. Tyler asked.

With a smile, Navarro said, “That was shipped to the Governor with my compliments.”

The consensus was that Navarro was right in his advice to them. They decided to let the Alcalde see that justice was done his way.

Before they left, Navarro also offered to help Jessica with the arrangements for the sale of her store should she decide to sell. He would have an independent solicitor appraise its value and post notices of the sale in the newspaper both here and in the Louisiana papers.

“It’s a highly valuable property,” the Alcade told her. “It will bring you a small fortune even after you’ve paid off your loan.”

“I appreciate your help,” Jessica said and stood. “Thank you, Sir.”

Navarro turned to Rory. “How long do you plan to remain in Tejas?”

“Most of the summer,” Rory said. “Why do you ask?”

“Because Tejas is a juicy bone in the jaws of two snarling wolves.”

After bidding the Alcalde and Mr. Tyler goodbye, Rory and Uncle Stephen escorted Jessica to her home above the store. She wanted to spend a few days alone and figure out what she should do next.

Uncle Stephen volunteered to water the horses, quite obviously

giving Rory time alone with Jessica to say goodbye.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to stay in town?” he asked as they climbed the stairs leading to her home.

“I just need time to rest and think. Give me some time to come to grips with all that’s happened.”

“I understand. But I’ll check on you sometime tomorrow afternoon.” He hugged her and gave her a gentle, chaste kiss before reluctantly descending the stairs. Despite its brevity, the kiss was a spark that lit his desire and left his lips burning for more of her.

As he strode toward his horse, he longed for the day when their kisses would no longer have to be chaste. When they could unleash the passion building between them. When he could show her, all that love was meant to be.

On the way home, Uncle Stephen decided that a family meeting was in order. He wanted to relate what happened with the Alcalde.

That suited Rory because he wanted to inform everyone of his decision to marry Jessica and bring her to Kentucky. She needed to leave Texas anyway. All signs pointed to turmoil and unrest in the future of the vast province.

“Uncle Stephen, what did you think of what the Alcalde said about two wolves fighting for Texas?”

“He’s right.”

“What will that mean for you and Samuel, Steve, and Thomas?”

“Mother Nature took away our first home in Texas. I won’t let any man, Mexican or American, take it again,” he nearly growled. “Or Indian.”

Rory glanced over at his uncle and was struck by the fierce set of his features. Plainly, Stephen meant to fight to the death for his home.

He was also struck by the strong resemblance to his father. Like

Father, Stephen's profile spoke of power and ageless strength. His body did as well with the confident set of his broad shoulders and strong arms. Their readiness to fight for their beliefs and their family was something else the two shared. Stephen was clearly a younger version of Sam.

"I have another reason for wanting a family meeting," Uncle Stephen said.

"What's that?" Rory asked.

Deep in thought, Stephen stared straight ahead, his back ramrod straight. "I'll tell you tonight when I tell the others."

Taking their usual places in front of the hearth, with a whiskey in their hands, the men of the family sat down for what Uncle Stephen had called a family meeting. Stephen promised his daughters-in-law that he would fill them in on any important news at dinner. The three wives of his cousins were in the kitchen now preparing the evening meal, and the tantalizing scents coming from their efforts made Rory's stomach growl.

"Why did ye call a family meetin'?" Bear asked Stephen.

"First, I believe Rory has news to share," Uncle Stephen answered.

"Happy news!" Rory declared. "Jessica and I are to be married!"

Father stood and shook his hand with enthusiasm and then patted him on the back. "I'm happy for you, son."

"I saw that comin'," Uncle Bear said. "That braw lass will make ye a fine wife. Congratulations to ye both."

"None of us are surprised, especially me," Alexander said. "On our trip, I heard about this woman for hundreds of miles. Every time Uncle Sam and Da were talking, I'd hear about her."

"Before you even got here?" Uncle Stephen asked. "How is that possible?"

“Long before,” Alexander said. “He’s been in love with her for weeks. Jessica is the woman of his dreams and daydreams.”

“I told you she’d be here. And she was!” Rory shot back.

“To Jessica!” Father said and raised his glass. “May she love Kentucky and love you even more.”

“Aye,” Bear said. “She’ll be returnin’ with us then?”

“She’d better be,” Father said. “I’m not leaving Rory here. Catherine would scalp me if I came home without her son.”

“Don’t worry. I believe Jessica will come back with us,” Rory said. “She just needs time to sell the store. She said it was all she had left of her father, so it will be hard for her.”

Next, Uncle Stephen related to them what the Alcalde had said, and they agreed that his letter to the Governor about Mr. Farley was most likely the best resolution of the matter.

Then, Uncle Stephen swallowed the remaining whiskey in his glass. “I want the four of you to return to Kentucky soon.”

“Nay!” Bear said. “We came for an extended visit.”

His tone serious, Stephen said, “You need to go home now.”

Alexander turned in his seat to stare at his uncle. “But why, Uncle? We had planned to stay for most of the summer.”

Stephen shook his head. “That would not be wise. I am an acquaintance of Haden Edwards. He was appointed Empressario of eastern Texas.”

“What’s an Empressario?” Alexander asked.

“A person who has been granted the right to settle on land in Coahuila y Tejas in exchange for recruiting settlers and taking responsibility for settling the area. The word is Spanish for entrepreneur,” Stephen explained.

“Who is he?” Rory asked.

“He’s an American land speculator known for his quick temper and aggressiveness. He and other colonists are increasingly dissatisfied with Mexican rule. He plans to declare independence from Mexican Texas and create the Republic of Fredonia near Nacogdoches.”

“Under what authority can he do that?” Father asked him.

“He believes he has the authority to determine the validity of existing land claims. Edwards plans to demand written proof of ownership in September. This week he posted notices on street corners to all current landowners that they will have to present evidence of their claims or forfeit to new settlers. Naturally, the older settlers find this highly offensive. Very few English-speaking residents have valid titles. Many have been duped and given counterfeit titles by fraudulent land speculators, just as many men were in Kentucky.”

“What of the Mexican landowners?” Alexander asked.

“Most Spanish-speaking landowners have lived on grants made to their families seventy or more years ago and are unable to produce any paperwork.”

“What will happen when people can’t prove the land is theirs?” Samuel asked.

“The land would be forfeited,” Uncle Stephen said.

“Bloody hell,” Samuel swore. “We just got this land from Mr. Tyler. And now we might lose it? After all the work we’ve put into it?”

“My father-in-law said he had a valid title to it,” Steve said.

“And I believe Mr. Tyler did,” Uncle Stephen told his sons. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t be tossed out by Edwards.”

“Is this Edwards fellow queer in the attic?” Bear asked. “Why would he come up with such a reckless plan?”

Uncle Stephen exhaled. “His actions are at least partially driven by greed. By removing settlers, he can sell their lands to wealthy planters, like himself, from the Southern United States or sell it at auction to the highest bidder.”

“Go on,” Father urged. “But first explain how you’ve learned all this.”

“Edwards has been trying to recruit me to his cause for some time. So far, I’ve managed to remain neutral.” Stephen began to pace as he spoke. “The Provisional Government of Mexico has

already increased the military presence in Coahuila y Tejas, and I believe the new governor will soon revoke Edwards' contract. When he does, war is likely. Edwards invested a sizeable fortune in Texas."

"What does Stephen F. Austin think about all this?" Steve asked.

"He strongly opposes the Fredonian rebels and encourages the settlers in his colony to fight on behalf of Mexico if there is a conflict. That would mean Americans fighting Americans. And since Edwards and his followers plan to include the Cherokees as allies in their move for independence, it will mean fighting Indians too."

"Good God," Father said. "This is a messy quagmire."

"Indeed," Uncle Stephen agreed. "And I don't want any of you to get caught in it and get stuck here. You need to leave soon." He pointed to his brothers. "Both of you will not be able to resist becoming involved."

Rory knew that what his Uncle Stephen said was true. His father and Bear would never turn away from a fight for a just cause. Especially if a member of their family needed them.

Bear growled deep in his chest. "Och! 'Tis na the way I wanted our visit to end."

"What about us?" Thomas asked his father. He was always the quiet cousin, but he spoke up now with firmness in his voice. "I don't want my wife and the child she's carrying to live here in danger. Samuel, I'm sure you feel the same about your wife and baby. And Steve and Rebecca. And her parents, the Tylers. And Baldy and Melly. I don't want any of us to sit here like nothing is happening. We need to prepare for the worst."

"You're right, son," Stephen said. "We do need to prepare. But we don't know yet what the worst will be. There's a storm coming, but we don't yet know if it's a shower or a hurricane."

"Father and Bear can go home," Rory said. "Alexander and I will stay and fight with you."

“To hell with that. We’ll all stay and fight too,” Bear said.

“No!” Uncle Stephen shouted. “None of you four will fight. I chose to bring us here to Texas. You didn’t. And I won’t have your wives made widows. I won’t have Catherine and Artis lose sons. My wanderlust has already cost us family members. I won’t lose any more.”

“Those deaths were not your fault!” Father told him, his voice also heated. “We’re family. And family sticks together no matter the cost. We won’t leave you in a time of need.”

“I won’t let you stay,” Stephen avowed.

“Then come back with us,” Father countered.

Stephen pursed his lips and shook his head. “No, our roots are already planted too deep here. My family and Baldy and Melly can sell the cattle, horses, and land and return the women to Louisiana for a time if it gets bad. But you four are leaving now. Not later.”

“But why the urgency?” Rory asked. “There’s no sign of fighting just yet.”

“You’re right—although it’s coming. The urgency is that you’ve made an enemy of Farley and that man is dangerous. He has connections. Disreputable contacts. And until he is escorted out of town, you won’t be safe.”

“You think he would seek revenge?” Father asked.

“Aye, the newspaper made it clear that the horse ridden by Alexander killed Donny,” Bear said. “Farley may well seek revenge. The Scots have a saying, ‘Where evil is vengeance follows’.”

“He may even want to harm Jessica,” Rory said, wishing he hadn’t brought her back into town. “Navarro said that if she pressed charges, he feared for her safety. What if Farley wants to harm her even if she doesn’t press charges? Harm her now?” At once, he began chastising himself. He should have brought her back here. “I’ll go get her first thing in the morning.”

Uncle Stephen nodded and told his brothers, “Your visit has meant the world to me.” Then he glanced toward Rory. “And coming here will mean everything to your future happiness, Rory.

Nevertheless, you four *are* leaving. Take your lovely Jessica to Kentucky. She'll be safe there." He glanced at his three sons, who sat next to each other on a bench. "And we will do what we have to to protect our home and our lives here in Texas."

Uncle Bear and Father looked unhappy. It was clear that their strong-willed brother would not be persuaded otherwise.

"I don't like this one bit," Father said. "But Stephen is right. Jessica needs to leave this town soon. We'll get you two married right away and then escort her to Kentucky."

Samuel, Steve, Thomas, Alexander, and Rory all glanced from one to another as their fathers decided their futures. Rory sympathized with his cousins. They'd spent a decade carving out a solid new life here in Texas only to see that it could potentially splinter apart. Part of him wanted to stay and help them, and part of him wanted to get Jessica the hell away from Texas.

Ignoring his growling stomach and the savory scent of the food the women were about to serve, Rory stood and told the others, “I’ve changed my mind. I’m not waiting until morning. I’m going to go get Jessica now.”

Surprisingly, no one tried to stop him. In fact, they all nodded and uttered their agreement. They seemed to have come to the same conclusion he had—Jessica could be in trouble.

His four cousins, two uncles, and Father followed him into the front room where numerous weapons were hung on the wall, and a long narrow table held a good supply of shot and powder by the front door.

At once, all four of his cousins began loading their pistols and rifles with fresh powder and shot and donning other assorted weapons, including axes and Indian tomahawks. The tomahawks had been added to the family’s impressive weapons collection when his Texas cousins had fought renegade Indian horse thieves along the Red River. It was just one of many stories Rory had heard over the last week.

“What are you doing?” he asked them.

“We’re going with you,” Samuel answered and gestured to his brothers.

“All of you?” Rory asked.

“All of us,” Steve said.

“Even me,” Thomas said. “Though I’m not the shot my brothers are, I can still hit most of what I aim at.”

“Don’t even try to stop us,” Alexander said. “Jessica may need our help.”

“Aye, ‘tis best if ye all go,” Uncle Bear agreed. “If this Farley is anythin’ like his son, we canna trust him.”

With a worried expression, Father handed his blade to Rory. “Take this. Even if you don’t use it, I’ll feel better knowing you have it. It has always fought for justice.”

Rory noticed the strained tone of Father’s voice. It was the first time Rory had ever seen him give up his treasured weapon. “Thank you,” was all he could manage to say.

Louisa joined them in the main room. “Dinner’s ready, gentlemen.”

Samuel turned toward his wife. “I’m sorry, Louisa, but my cousins and I must ride into town. We need to get Jessica and bring her back here.”

“But why?” Louisa asked. “I thought she wanted to return to her home and the store. She needs time to herself to grieve and rest.”

“I’ll explain after they leave,” Uncle Stephen told his daughter-in-law. “Get going boys. Time may be of the essence.”

The five cousins filed out of the Wyllie homestead and swiftly saddled their mounts in the horse barn. Within minutes, they were thundering side-by-side toward Nacogdoches. A brilliant sunset painted the rolling hills and dark clouds on the horizon in shades of gold, violet, and purple.

In the stillness, Jessica’s visions and thoughts of what she’d lost, and what she’d gained, kept her from falling asleep for a long time. It was still hard to accept that her father was dead. That she would never see him or talk to him again. And now she would have to sell the store she loved. Her work here was ending. Her life here would soon end. She would have to leave her best friend behind. And all

of that saddened her.

But a new life awaited her in Kentucky with a new love. And a new family. And that gladdened her heart like nothing else ever had in her life. Their love would have been instantaneous had it not been for Pa's disappearance. But after they found her father and they spent that horrible day together in the cave, the bond between them grew strong amid the adversity. A love born of faith in each other. She would trust in that love. She would trust in him.

When she thought about Rory, she could feel her breath and body relaxing. She could feel her thoughts calming. And as her heart opened, she let Rory's love fill the empty and sad spaces. Like brilliant, sparkling sunshine after a summer rain, his love filled her with warmth and dried up the sadness.

Finally able to focus on her future with Rory, she was smiling as she drifted off to sleep to the sound of distant thunder. Her buckskin angel continued to occupy her mind as she dreamt of him. Dreams that stirred sensual longings that were new to her. Dreams that made her reach for him. But then her dream frightened her because, no matter how desperately she reached out, she couldn't quite grasp him. Something or someone was pulling her away.

A jarring loud bang on Jessica's door startled her to wakefulness.

Still troubled by her dream, she tugged on her robe and slippers, wondering if it was Rory at her door. It had to be. Was there some emergency at the Wyllie homestead? "Just a moment," she called out. Using an ember tong, she picked up a small piece of still smoldering kindling from the woodburning stove to light two candles, one in her room and one in the front room.

Then, without thinking, she flung the door open.

The man standing there glared at her with a viciousness so intense it made her gasp. Mr. Farley pushed on her chest and

shoved her backward.

Behind him, two crude-looking men sneered at her with an air of antagonism. They followed Farley into her front room. One tall and one tubby, they both possessed roughhewn faces, and long, oily dark hair hung beneath filthy hats. Their repellent stench seemed to fill the room instantly.

The two sauntered closer to her, and she took two steps back.

"Lordy, Farley, you got us a fair princess here," the tall one said. "You're right. She'll bring a sizable fortune in Galveston."

"What are you doing here!" she demanded of Farley.

"Get dressed, you're going with these gentlemen," he ordered.

"Never!" she avowed.

He pulled a small, concealable flintlock, known as a pocket pistol, from his coat pocket and pointed it toward her forehead. "You are responsible for driving my only son to his death. You're going to pay, Miss Harrison."

Staring into the pistol was frightening, but it was the icy threat in his voice and eyes that made her fear mount.

"You're going to Galveston," Farley said in a commanding voice. "The pirate trade is always looking for attractive young women to barter. By selling you into slavery, I'll make up what I lost on those rifles and whiskey."

So the man *was* behind Donny's scheme. Her breaths grew deeper as fear mounted within her. The Gulf of Mexico served as a major port for pirates and privateers alike. And Galveston was known to be a place where pirates went to sell or trade their stolen goods. Sometimes those goods were people, particularly slaves and women.

She had to persuade Farley to change his mind. "I'm sorry about your son, Sir. His death was an accident. Alexander's horse grew panicky and reared up. It was no one's fault." Actually, it was Donny's fault, but this was not the time to make that point.

Farley's lips twisted as he snarled, "It *was* all your fault. If you had just cooperated, he'd be alive. Now get dressed, or you'll be

traveling in your nightclothes.”

“You must wait here with your men.”

“You have two minutes,” Farley said.

Jessica turned and hurried into her room. She shut the door behind her and at once found paper, ink, and quill. The quill fairly flew across the page as she wrote a short note to Rory. Then she dressed as swiftly as she could, and to her dismay, noticed an ink stain on her fingers.

The door flew open just as she stuck her hand in her pocket. “How dare you invade a lady’s bedroom, Sir!”

“You’re no lady,” Farley roared. “You’re a tease who led my son on, tormenting him for weeks.” He looked ready to murder her.

The gravity of the situation hit her. First, Pa was abducted, and now her. She moved so her body would block the note she had just scribbled to Rory. The note was her only hope of rescue.

Farley stuck the pistol to her side. “Move!”

Jessica swiftly strode toward her front door.

The tall man grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. He held it firmly and painfully and forced her down the stairs.

Nighttime darkness and the shadows between the two buildings hid four horses standing in the rain.

The tall man hurled her up and onto the saddle of the smallest horse. The shorter ham of a man helped him tie her hands together and then to the saddle. Neither one noticed the ink stain on her finger, or if they did, they weren’t smart enough to figure out what it might mean.

“No cries for help,” Farley warned as he mounted a dappled steed. “If you cry out for help, your good friend Rebecca will join us on our little journey.”

It was a threat she would take seriously. The man was capable of anything. She noticed the stuffed traveling bag tied to the back of his horse’s saddle. She suspected he was taking all the money deposited in his bank. Money entrusted to him by hardworking people who could ill afford to have their savings stolen.

"It appears you are leaving town. Taking the town's money with you?" she asked.

He gave her a black look. "Yes, I'm taking it all. I only delayed this long because I was waiting for you to come back to town. After I sell you, I'll be sailing across the gulf while you grow accustomed to your new life as a whore."

Her breath caught in her throat, but she mustered the courage to give him a hostile glare. "You are a vile, evil man, Sir!"

His nostrils flared with fury. "I'll teach you some respect." He flung up a four-strand, braided leather quirt, and viciously lashed it against her thigh. Then he whipped the same leg again with even more force biting deeper into her flesh.

Jessica howled in pain as the leather ripped through the fabric of her skirt and flayed open her skin. Struggling to control the mare who had been frightened by the strikes, she snarled at him in a voice taut with anger, "I repeat, you're evil!"

"In case you didn't know, we are too," the tall man said before he leaned over and savagely slapped her across the face. "You'll show Mr. Farley respect, or we'll gag you."

The shorter man chuckled nastily, revealing gaps in his discolored teeth. He ogled the bare skin now exposed on her leg.

Hurting terribly, the welts left by the whip began to bleed and burned like fingers of fire. And her cheek and jaw throbbed from the teeth-rattling slap. Her pains yielded quickly to fury. She flashed all of them a look of pure disdain. "God will punish you."

"I wouldn't *bank* on that," Farley said.

The other two chuckled at his wisecrack.

Farley whipped his horse with the same quirt and led them behind the town's stores. There were few people out and about, and he was able to detour around those they did see.

Soon, they were on the road that led south through rugged, wide-open country. Normally, she would enjoy the scenery, even at night. But the rain, her injuries, and her disgusting escorts made the ride a living nightmare.

She heard Farley tell the other two that they would ride all night. He rode in front, and the other two scoundrels rode behind Jessica, preventing her from trying to ride away. Even if she could, she doubted she could outrun them on the small mare they'd brought for her to ride, especially with her hands tied together.

Her heart reached out to Rory. To her buckskin angel. Would she ever see him again? Would she ever again feel his warm lips against hers? Would they ever be the family she longed for? The chances of any of that happening grew poorer with each mile they covered. An acute sense of loss filled her and became a heavy weight bearing down on her.

The only thing that gave Jessica hope was the note. Surely Rory would find it. But would it be too late? He had said he would check on her tomorrow afternoon. By then, her abductors would be so far ahead of him that he could never catch up to them before they reached Galveston. Moreover, if by some miracle he did, it would be one man against three. And two of the three were obviously hired killers.

That realization made a new torment eat at her. Rory could be killed if he caught up to them before they reached Galveston. She would rather be sold into slavery and live an unsavory life than to watch him die. Just the thought of harm coming to him made burning tears spring into her eyes. It made her realize how much she loved him. So very much.

Regret for their lost future together assailed her. There would be no wedding, no passion, no children. No adventures together on their way to Kentucky. And no large family when she got there. No celebrating Christmas at Cumberland Falls. It was all lost to her now. It would be just her. Alone in the world.

She shuddered and let out a sharp breath, as much from her miserable, disheartening thoughts, as from the cold rain.

Jessica tried to remember everything she'd read in newspapers about Galveston and pirates, stories she'd always found enthralling. The first settlement there was built less than ten years

ago by the pirate Louis Aury, who supported Mexico's rebellion against Spain. While Aury conducted an unsuccessful raid against Spain, the pirate Jean Lafitte sailed in on his ship, *The Pride*, its flag, a skull with two crossed cutlasses underneath, flying atop his ship. With his two-hundred and fifty men, he occupied Galveston. Lafitte's men built homes and organized Galveston into a pirate kingdom he called Campeche. He then anointed himself the island's head of government.

Loving notoriety, Lafitte, before his death, welcomed those who would write about his exploits. The thrilling newspaper accounts of his pirates, and their legendary exploits, had been distant and faraway tales that had fired her imagination. Now, they were frighteningly real. Without Lafitte's leadership, these pirates became even more immoral, sleazy, and disreputable. The thought of being turned over to those types of men made a chilling quiver race down her back.

If she couldn't race away, at least she could delay them. She gradually slowed and then tugged her mount to a stop. She leaned over and let her face touch the mare's mane. She closed her eyes and remained motionless.

"What's wrong with her?" the tall man asked and moved his horse close to her.

"Hell if I know," the shorter one said, coming up on her other side.

"Mr. Farley, hold up," the tall man shouted. "I think she fainted."

A few moments later, she heard Farley's horse's hooves clomping in the mud as he approached her.

"Somethin' wrong with her?" the tall man asked Farley.

"Nothing this won't fix," Farley snarled.

Pain exploded across her back, and she screamed when he brutally whipped her again with the quirt. The stinging wounds made blood pound in her head, and humiliation made her nearly choke on the anger that welled inside her.

Lord, please. Let me live the life you want for me, not what Mr. Farley intends, she prayed, her cheek still pressed against the mare's wet mane.

As she slowly straightened her throbbing back, she told him through clenched teeth, "You are going to hell, if I have to send you there myself."

"The only place we're going is Galveston. Delay us again, and I'll strip that blouse off your back before I whip you again," Farley threatened and then rode on.

She grew more alarmed with every mile, and soon her despair was so great, she could no longer hold back her tears.

On and on they rode through rain, desolate lands, and darkness.

As the five of them neared Nacogdoches, Rory rode in the middle and glanced to his left and right at his cousins. He realized their bond went beyond mere friendship. They were bound by blood. That bond would be unbreakable no matter how many miles would soon separate them.

Their presence, and the resounding sound of their five horses galloping against the hard ground, gave Rory courage. Everything would be all right. The cool night air blowing against his heated face also helped to cool his concerns. Perhaps Jessica was just fine resting in her home, and the worst that would happen would be his interrupting her sleep.

But the air held the scent of a storm, and his apprehension refused to be subdued for long. As dark clouds gathered on the horizon, worry soon crawled back inside him to gnaw at his heart.

I'm coming for you, Jessica.

Rory and his cousins rode up to Harrison's, with darkness and rain cloaking the town. Most people were already tucked in for the night, but a few of the saloons still held night owls. There were no lights on inside the general store, but he could see light coming through the window upstairs.

He leaped off of Buck, tossed the reins to Alexander, and fairly flew up the store's side stairs that led to Jessica's home. Not

wishing to scare her, he knocked softly. But when there was no answer, he knocked harder. And then harder still when no one came to the door.

“She’s not answering,” he yelled down to his cousins.

“Try the door,” Alexander suggested.

He did and found it unlocked. Stepping inside, he yelled, “Jessica, it’s me.” A candle lit the front room.

Still nothing. Cautiously, he stepped into her bedroom. A candle was burning there as well. “Jessica!”

She was gone.

Alexander came into the bedroom. “Any sign of her?”

“No, and she left with two candles still burning.” With bone-chilling understanding, he realized Farley got to her first. Stunned, he stood in the empty bedroom, his heart in his throat. What was Farley doing to her? Possibilities rolled through his mind, each one worse than the last.

His mind raced while Alexander began looking around. Where would Farley have taken her? To the cave again? No, more likely someplace else, but where? How would he find her?

“She left you a note!” Alexander said, shoving a piece of paper at him.

“It says, ‘Farley’s two men taking me to Galveston to sell.’”

“Good God,” Alexander said. “They intend to make a slave of her.”

“Let’s go!”

They blew out the candles and raced down the stairs. “We found a note. Farley and two men abducted her,” he told his cousins as he remounted. “They’re headed to Galveston.”

“That’s due south,” Samuel said.

For once, Alexander didn’t ask how far, Rory did. “How far is Galveston?”

“About one hundred and seventy-five miles,” Samuel said.

“But we won’t have to go that far,” Steve said and pointed to the ground. “We can catch up to them. I just checked the inside of

those horse droppings. They're still warm. They must have just left here."

"How long ago?" Rory asked.

Steve held his hand out to let the rain wash his fingers. "Thirty minutes, maybe. No more than an hour."

"We'll catch them," Samuel said. "We're better mounted than they are and likely better riders."

"Should we tell the sheriff or Baldy?" Thomas asked.

"No, we can't spare the time," Rory said. "Let's go."

Samuel led the way as the five of them sped through the sleepy town and turned south.

Rory's heart pounded to the beat of Buck's galloping hooves. His spirit reached out to Jessica. *I'm coming for you!*

At the beginning of the rugged road that led toward Galveston, Samuel slowed them and stared down at the ground. "Four horses."

"Farley must be headed south too," Rory said. Had the banker taken all the bank's funds, abandoned his home, and headed to Galveston to sail away from Texas?

If so, God and the five of them were about to change the man's plans. He urged Buck to the gelding's fastest gallop.

Tonight, he would be more avenging angel than guardian angel.

Jessica hadn't dressed warmly enough, and the rain made her cotton skirt and blouse cling to her shivering skin. And the rainwater made her long hair feel like a wet blanket against her back. At least the raindrops hid her tears. She didn't want the three scoundrels to know she was crying. She wouldn't give Farley the satisfaction.

Despite the darkness, again and again, she glanced back with tired, weepy eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of Rory. Her hope

wasn't logical. He would be asleep at the Wyllie's place. He wouldn't be coming into town until tomorrow afternoon. And then, even if he found the note and took off at once, he would still be many hours behind them.

"What ya lookin' for Missy?" the hammy one asked, his voice loaded with ridicule. "Yer guardian angel?"

That made the tall one laugh.

Yes, yes, that was exactly what she was looking for! Her hope refused to die. He *was* her buckskin angel, and somehow she knew he would come for her. She was sure of it, and she glanced back one more time. She saw only darkness, made even gloomier by the rain. Still, she continued to hope.

Instead of looking over her shoulder, she should have been looking forward, because when she turned back, there he was. She gasped at the sight of Rory down the road sitting calmly atop Buck, his rifle raised and aimed at Farley. He must have ridden ahead of them and then turned back to face them head-on.

Her heart leapt with joy and then squeezed with dread. This was exactly what she worried about earlier—Rory fighting three ruthless men. Would he prevail or be killed? A cold terror seized her.

She tugged her mount to a stop. Strangely, the rain stopped suddenly too, and she could see Rory clearly. His features held both angelic goodness and avenging determination. It made his handsome face even more extraordinary.

"Do na or ye be dead men!"

She turned her mount sideways and saw that it was Alexander who'd shouted to the two men behind her as they reached for their pistols. Alexander held a pistol in each hand.

One by one Samuel, Steve, and Thomas emerged as well. The sight of the three well-armed brothers, with fierce looks on their faces, made her nearly weep from relief.

Rory would be safe. And so would Alexander.

With the weapons of four men pointed at them, the two ruffians

wisely holstered their pistols and held up their hands.

Jessica swung her gaze back to Rory, who was walking his horse closer to Farley.

Farley reached into his coat pocket.

“Pocket pistol!” she yelled to Rory.

The warning came too late.

Farley fired.

The distance between Rory and Farley was too great for a small pistol’s range, and the banker’s shot fell short, merely splattering mud between them.

The man’s potshot unleashed an even greater fury within Rory. But he tempered his anger with control.

Farley glared at Rory with a malevolence that might have intimidated the devil himself. Then, like a fiend launched from hell, the banker savagely lashed his horse with a quirt, and the stallion shot forward.

Rory couldn’t believe Farley was racing straight toward him. The man must think Rory wouldn’t fire his rifle for fear of the shot hitting Jessica or someone else. The bastard was wrong. He never missed. He also kept his powder dry by wrapping the rifle and his powder horn in soft oiled leather during foul weather.

He squinted his eyes to pinpoints, exhaled, and held his breath. He fired, and the air reverberated with the sound of the powerful flintlock.

Farley flew backward and dropped off his horse’s hips and into the mud.

At once, Steve went after the frightened stallion. His cousin had a natural way with horses, and if anyone could calm the stallion, it would be Steve.

Rory quickly reloaded his rifle, a habit ingrained into him since childhood by his father. He shoved the rifle into the sheath on his

saddle and then galloped to Jessica. When he reached her, he swiftly dismounted and then clutched her waist to swing her off the mare. He sat her on her feet and then cut the rope at her wrists with his father's knife.

Jessica's hair hung limp, her eyes were red and swollen, and she was completely disheveled. Her clothes were even ripped. To Rory, she had never looked so beautiful. He hugged her fiercely, and she winced for some reason. Was she crying or hurt?

Her legs must have been stiff from riding because she stumbled and limped as she leaned into him. "You came! You came!" she said as she sobbed. She stroked his buckskin shirt as if to confirm that he was really there.

"Of course, I came," he whispered. "I love you! I love you!"

Steve rode up, leading the runaway stallion behind him. "That traveling bag on his saddle is full and very heavy."

"He admitted that he stole the town's money. It's in that bag," Jessica said.

"I'd suggest we turn it over to Mr. Tyler until we can find a new banker," Samuel suggested. "He's one of the only men that I trust completely."

She limped again, and he noticed the tear in her skirt and the bloodstains on the fabric. "What happened to your leg?" Rory gingerly moved the torn skirt aside and saw the numerous angry and bloody welts on her thigh.

"Look at her back," Alexander said, his voice sharp and his face glowering.

The shock of seeing bloody gashes beneath the shreds of her blouse quickly yielded to white-hot fury. "Who did this?" Rory demanded.

She glanced toward the banker who hadn't moved. With a tear choked voice, she said, "Farley whipped me with his quirt."

Like a shot from his rifle, his anger exploded. Father's knife was still in his hand, and it called to him. Gripping the deerhorn handle, he spun around, marched over to Farley, and dropped

down next to him. Snarling with rage, he hovered over the man's chest.

Blood seeped from a hole in Farley's upper chest. This despicable man caused the death of Mr. Harrison, abducted Jessica to sell into slavery, whipped her, and stole the money belonging to the town's people. "I should scalp you," Rory swore through gritted teeth.

Farley's eyelids flew open. He wasn't dead. With a beastly howl into the night, the man reached for Rory's throat.

Rory freed the rage teeming within him. He planted the long blade in Farley's wicked heart. A death blow against evil. Breathing hard, he stared down at the blade, remembering his father's words about the knife fighting for justice.

Alexander reached down and raised him up. "Ye've killed him twice, cousin. 'Tis enough."

"I'm not so sure," Rory swore, his voice raw.

Alexander withdrew the knife and wiped it on Farley's coat before handing it back to him.

Rory was still breathing hard as he sheathed the blade.

"Rory," Jessica said and reached toward him.

He swiftly closed the distance between them, wrapped his arms around her, and enveloped her in a hug. She was cold and shivering, so he trailed frantic kisses down her wet neck and rubbed her back to warm her. With each kiss, his heart grew less frantic. He had her back, and she was whole, and she was his.

As they stood there, tears of relief cooled his fury until he noticed the side of her face. One side was swollen and noticeably redder than the other side. Someone must have hit her. "Did Farley do this too?"

Jessica pointed to the taller of the two good-for-nothings.

Rory rushed over and yanked him from the saddle. He slapped the man as hard as he could. "That's for her." Then he balled his fist and threw it into the man's jaw. "That's for me."

The tall one toppled like a rotten tree.

Alexander yanked the other one down off his saddle.

The portly fellow said, "What? I didn't do nothin'."

"Exactly," Alexander snarled. "You let two men hit a woman, you no good slug of a man." His cousin tore into the man with both fists until he too was knocked cold.

Samuel, Thomas, and Alexander tied and then tossed the two hired killers over their saddles like dead men, which they likely soon would be. The sheriff would likely turn them over to the Comandante at the fort. Both would probably be shot by Mexican soldiers after a swift trial.

"How did you know to come tonight? I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow?" she asked Rory.

"I don't know. Maybe it was a feeling sent from God. I just knew I had to get you and bring you to safety."

"And why are all your cousins with you?"

He gave her a half-grin. "They all insisted on coming. Maybe God spoke to them too."

Alexander overheard them and said, "They're Wyllies. And I'm a MacKay. That's why we came."

Samuel added, "We came because you're family, Jessica."

Samuel was right, and Rory gave his cousin a grateful smile. Even though he and Jessica weren't yet married, it felt as though they were.

"Let's get Farley's body and his two filthy minions to the sheriff," Rory said. "Then you're coming home with us... to your family."

Epilogue-Leaving

The sun rose in Jessica's eyes and on the eastern horizon as Rory set off for Kentucky with his new bride. Both were gloriously beautiful, and both gave his heart immense hope.

It would be a month before they could reach home. But unlike the journey, their love was endless—immeasurable. They had a lifetime together to look forward to. But even now, after only being married a week, he knew that would never be enough time with the woman he loved more than he could ever have imagined.

Every moment they'd spent together, particularly their passion-filled nights, made Rory realize why he had dreamed of Jessica for so long. She made him complete. His soul recognized her as its missing piece.

Before he met her, he was only a part of the man he was now with her in his life. She saw and accepted him for who he was, and at the same time, would help him to grow into the best version of himself.

Behind them, Father, Bear, and Alexander rode a short distance away, giving the two a few moments alone to enjoy the momentous moment. They were leaving Texas and heading toward Jessica's new home—Kentucky.

The day before, Baldy and Melly had joined them all for a farewell meal. After they finished the meal, Father opened a saddlebag and gave the two all the money they found on the forest robbers, and all the money they'd found on the Tejano Devils. "That should be enough to build a fine orphanage, and a school for

the orphans and the other children in town,” Father had said. Like Rory’s mother, Catherine, his father supported education for children, both boys, and girls.

After seeing all the money, Melly had swiped at the tears of happiness in her eyes. “This money will be put to worthy use, I assure you.”

“If war does occur here, as always, there will be children left without parents,” Baldy had added. “And widows who will need help as well.”

Father had agreed and said, “If you need more, let me know. I know Catherine would be more than happy to donate the funds.”

They’d received word, in a letter sent in care of Uncle Stephen, that Mother, Aunt Artis, and the three grown children, were leaving Boston sooner than they had expected to. They would be back in Kentucky well before the time the five of them should arrive. From the tone of the letter, it appeared that neither Mother nor Artis was mad at Father and Uncle Bear for taking their journey. In fact, they were happy they had the chance to see their brother and nephews again.

Rory couldn’t wait to introduce his bride to everyone, especially Mother. He was also anxious to see Little John, Allison, and his niece, little Margaret. The seven-year-old would be thrilled with the presents they each bought her in Nacogdoches. But the best gift of all would be her new Aunt Jessica.

At last, Jessica would have her big family.

Jessica turned toward her husband, who rode beside her. Rory’s brazenly handsome face smiled warmly at her. She couldn’t believe how much her life had changed and in such a short time. Her happiness was so great she could barely contain it within her chest, and she seemed to have developed a permanent smile ever since Baldy married them, beside her father’s grave.

The wedding, grounded in the strength of their love and the power of their faith, was all she could have hoped for. Baldy had told them that marriage takes courage to go forward together without knowing what the future holds. Just as Rory had done when he came to Texas, and as she was about to do by going to Kentucky.

She could credit her happiness to one thing. Love. Heaven-sent love that came at a time when she needed it the most.

“Are you excited?” Rory asked.

“I’m way beyond excited,” she answered. “I’m ecstatic.” Even that word didn’t adequately convey the elation she felt. “I can’t wait to meet the rest of your family and to see Kentucky.” By marrying Rory, she had committed to not only him but his family. And his home.

“You’ll have to wait a while. It’s a long journey and it will be difficult at times.”

“Sometimes we must sacrifice for what will make us happy.” She glanced around her. A spring-fed creek bubbled nearby, deer grazed in the tall grass, and golden shafts of the morning sun streamed through the trees and onto the undulating grasslands. “As long as we’re together, it won’t be too long. I’m going to love seeing more of the country.”

“I just want to get you home safely,” Rory told her. “And then I want to keep you in my bed for about a week.”

She giggled and felt her face warm. “Won’t your mother think that’s odd?”

“She won’t mind as long as it results in a grandchild.”

She considered that thought for a moment. “If it’s a boy, can we name him after my father?”

“William? We can, although we already have a family member named William, my father’s brother. He was sheriff of Boonesborough for many years and is now a lawyer.”

“No, I meant Harrison.”

“Harrison Wyllie. I like that very much. But what if it’s a girl? A

pretty little lass?”

“Then, we’ll name her after your father—Samantha.”

They both laughed hard.

The other three rode closer. “What are ye laughing about?” Bear asked.

“About a name,” Jessica said.

“A name is a mighty powerful thing,” Father said. “Take the word Texas. It means friends or allies. And the word Kentucky means land of tomorrow.”

How very fitting, Jessica thought, on both counts.

Sam shook his head regretfully. “I hated having to leave Stephen and his family so soon,” he told Bear, who rode next to him. “That was a tough goodbye.”

They both knew that they might never see their brother again. That undeniable and dreadful fact filled Sam with a sense of loss that he would feel for many miles.

“Aye, but ‘tis been a hell of an adventure, hasn’t it?” Bear asked with a glint of humor in his eyes.

“It has,” Sam agreed. Their trip turned out to be everything he had hoped for and more. He would cling to the memories they’d made for the rest of his days.

They sat in silence for a while until Alexander pulled his horse alongside Bear.

“Where are we goin’ next?” Bear asked. His words were playful but the meaning was not.

The three of them chuckled happily.

Alexander leaned forward in the saddle and told them, “Well, I don’t have a wife yet.”

As they retraced their journey in reverse, Rory thought back to his reluctance to leave. His unwillingness to put them all in danger. Never reckless and daring, he was much more comfortable staying in Kentucky. Doing what he knew, staying safe, not taking a trip fraught with risks for sentimental reasons. He hadn't liked the idea of taking a chance.

And as it turned out, he was right. The trip was dangerous. And difficult.

But he also had never been more wrong.

Only by coming here to Texas did he become the man he was supposed to be. A man who recognized his father as a true hero who still had much to teach him. A man who recognized the real value of family who would die for you. Not only Uncle Bear and Alexander but his courageous Texas family too—Uncle Stephen, Samuel, Steve, Thomas, and all their plucky wives.

The most important lesson of all had been about love. If you believe in it, it *will* happen. Love might be a step away or hundreds of miles away. For each person, the journey might be different. For him, Texas is where he had to come to find love. To find the woman of his dreams.

All he had to do was take a chance.

He glanced over at Jessica, who was still smiling. She was worth every hardship. Every risk. Every night spent sleeping on hard ground. Every bug bite. Every long day spent with his legs stretched across Buck's broad back. Every threat from outlaws or Indians. Or crazed bankers.

He would do it all again a thousand times to find Jessica here at the end of his journey. To become her buckskin angel.

He glanced toward heaven. *Thank you for sending me to Texas.*

The End—and The Beginning

Facts and Inspirations Behind the Story

Westward expansion is one of the most extraordinary periods in U.S. history, and the settlement of Texas is surely one of the most interesting chapters and definitely inspired my *Wilderness Dawning Series*.

To see a copy of the 1820 Thomson map that Sam used, see: <https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/62481/united-states-and-additions-1820-thomson>

As the four men approached Nashville, they heard the song *Hail Columbia*. To learn more about this music composed by Philip Phile in 1789 for the first inauguration of George Washington, visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hail,_Columbia

Jessica was a fan of reading newspapers. In actuality, it would be five more years before one was first published in her town. According to *Notes on Early Texas Newspapers, 1819-1836*, by Eugene C. Barker, “In the fall of 1829 two papers started almost simultaneously, at Nacogdoches and San Felipe, *The Mexican Advocate* and *The Texas Gazette*. The first was established at Nacogdoches by Milton Slocum and was published in English and Spanish.” From the census lists in the Nacogdoches Archives (Texas State Library), Milton Slocum, from Louisiana, and a printer by profession, arrived at Nacogdoches in 1829.

For more information on the Indian Wars in Texas, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas%E2%80%93Indian_wars.

Although I placed the bank in Nacogdoches, according to the Texas State Historical Association, the “Banco Nacional de Texas, or Texas National Bank, was established as a bank of issue by Governor José Félix Trespalacios in San Antonio on October 21, 1822. Members of the city council were made officers in the bank,

and four soldiers were given the task of hand-producing the notes. Just under 12,000 pesos was issued in two installments on November 1 and December 1, 1822, before the bank was suspended. The short-lived experiment in emergency financing proved costly to most noteholders, who had to wait until 1830 for the redemption of the Texas money by the Mexican government.” See more about Texas’ first bank at: <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/cpb01>

The funeral service sermon by Baldy was based on the poem *Death Is Nothing At All*, by Henry Scott Holland. I shared this poignant poem with one of my loyal readers on the ‘angelversary’ of her husband’s death as she called it. I hope she found the words comforting.

For more information on the Fredonian Rebellion, please see: <https://easttexashistory.org/items/show/166>. This uprising had a profound influence on Texas history and the history of the Wiley’s. The fictional character of Stephen Wyllie in this book is based on the real Stephen Wiley, who lived, we believe, near Nacogdoches on 5,000 acres in the Cove Springs area near present-day Melrose, nine miles southeast of Nacogdoches. He died in 1826, the same year as the rebellion. Coincidence? Unlikely, in my opinion. Although further research needs to occur to prove he died as a result of the actions of Haden Edwards or others, we believe that he may have been one of the ‘old’ settlers from whom Edwards tried to confiscate land for his ‘new’ settlers.

On November 22, 1826, the Fredonian Rebellion began with a group of thirty-six men who arrested the local authorities and took over the Old Stone Fort in Nacogdoches to use as their headquarters. According to EastTexasHistory.org, “On December 21, 1826, the rebels signed their own Declaration of Independence from Mexico. Unfortunately for the rebels, Indian assistance never materialized, and with the militia and Mexican troops closing in, both the cause and the fort were abandoned by the end of January 1827. Most of the rebels fled eastward towards the Sabine River

and then into Louisiana.”

Though the Fredonian Rebellion failed, the event alarmed the Mexican government, which decided that something had to be done to prevent such occurrences in the future, paving the way for the coming Texas Revolution.

All of my novels are inspired by the history of our nation’s settlement, and specifically by the Wyllie/Wiley family. (Like many last names in America, the spelling changes depending on how the census taker or tax collector spelled it.)

If you are interested in reading my other novels, they are listed on the next pages. The first series—*American Wilderness Series Romances*—are novels about the first generation of Wyllie brothers—Stephen, Captain Sam, William, Edward, John, and their adopted Scots brother, Bear. The second series—*Wilderness Hearts*—are stories about their grown children, though the Wyllie brothers are also major characters in each of the books in the second series. My third series—*Wilderness Dawning*—includes RED RIVER RIFLES, LAND OF STARS, and BUCKSKIN ANGEL.

I hope you will long remember BUCKSKIN ANGEL, *Wilderness Dawning Series* – Book Three. If you enjoyed reading this story, I would be honored if you would share your thoughts with your friends. Regardless of whether you are reading print or electronic versions, I’d be truly grateful if you posted a short review on the book’s page on Amazon. Reviews are so helpful to both authors and readers. It helps the works of authors to stay visible on Amazon, and it helps readers find books they will enjoy.

If you would like to contact me directly, please send me a note through my website <http://www.dorothywiley.com> under the ‘Contact’ tab. Under that same tab, you can also sign up for my Newsletter to receive special offers for free or discounted books.

To receive notifications of my new releases, please follow me on Amazon at www.amazon.com/author/dorothywiley. And you can follow me and all your favorite authors on **BookBub**, which is a free website for book lovers.

Thanks for your support and your Amazon review!

Blessings,

Dorothy

Also by Dorothy Wiley

All of Wiley's novels, in her closely related series, are available in both print and eBook, and many in audiobooks at www.amazon.com/author/dorothywiley

So far, the story of the Wyllies is told in three series—

AMERICAN WILDERNESS SERIES

Book One — the story of Stephen and Jane:

WILDERNESS TRAIL OF LOVE

Book Two — the story of Sam and Catherine:

NEW FRONTIER OF LOVE

Book Three — the story of William and Kelly:

WHISPERING HILLS OF LOVE

Book Four — the story of Bear and Artis:

FRONTIER HIGHLANDER VOW OF LOVE

Book Five — A story of Sam and Catherine and the entire family:

FRONTIER GIFT OF LOVE

Book Six — the story of Edward and Dora:

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Book Two — the story of Gabe and Martha:

LOVE'S SUNRISE

Book Three —the story of Little John and Allison:

LOVE'S GLORY

Book Four—the story of Liam and Polly:

LOVE'S WHISPER

WILDERNESS DAWNING Series

Book One—the story of Samuel and Louisa

red river rifles

*Book Two—Part One - the story of Samuel and Louisa continued and Part Two
- the story of Steve and Rebecca*

LAND OF STARS

Book Three – the story of Rory and Jessica

BUCKSKIN ANGEL

About the Author



Amazon bestselling novelist Dorothy Wiley is an award-winning, multi-published author of Historical Romance and Western Romance. Her first two series, the *American Wilderness Series* and *Wilderness Hearts Series* are set on the American frontier when Kentucky was the West. And because nothing stays the same on the frontier, not even its location, her third series, *Wilderness Dawning—the Texas Wyllie Brothers*, continues the highly-acclaimed Wyllie family saga but brings some of the family to the new edge of the West—Texas. All of her novels blend thrilling action with the romance of a moving love story to create exceedingly engaging page-turners.

Like Wiley's compelling heroes, who from the onset make it clear they will not fail despite the adversities they face, this author is likewise destined for success. Her novels have won numerous awards, notably a finalist for a 2020 Will Rogers Medallion Award in the Western Romance category, a RONE Award Finalist, a Laramie Award Finalist, a Chatelaine Finalist for Romantic Fiction, an Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Quarter-finalist, a Readers' Favorite Gold Medal, a USA Best Book Awards Finalist, and a Historical Novel Society Editor's Choice. And Wiley's books continue to earn five-star ratings from readers and high praise from reviewers, including several Crowned Heart reviews from *InD'Tale Magazine*.

Wiley's extraordinary historical and western romances, inspired by history, teem with action and cliff-edge tension. Her books' timeless messages of family and loyalty are both raw and honest. In all her novels, the author's complex characters come alive and are joined by a memorable ensemble of friends and family. And, as she skillfully unravels a compelling tale, Wiley includes rich historical elements to create a vivid colonial world that celebrates the heritage of the frontier.

Wiley attended college at The University of Texas in Austin. She graduated with honors, receiving a Bachelor of Journalism, and grew to dearly love both Texas and a 7th-generation Texan, her husband Larry. Her husband's courageous ancestors, early pioneers of Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas, inspired her novels. After a distinguished career in corporate marketing and public relations, Wiley is living her dream—writing novels that touch the hearts of her readers.

YOU'RE INVITED TO CONNECT WITH THE AUTHOR:

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Goodreads – https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8441725.Dorothy_Wiley

BookBub – <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/dorothy-wiley>

Pinterest – See Dorothy's inspiration boards for each book <https://www.pinterest.com/dorothymwiley/?etslf=8021&eq=Dor>

Instagram – <https://www.instagram.com/dorothymwiley/?hl=en>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & THANKS

With every new book I release, my gratitude to my loyal readers grows. I enormously appreciate all your kind reviews, thoughtful notes sent to me through my website [dorothywiley.com](http://www.dorothywiley.com), and caring Facebook comments. Believe me, you are the primary reason I keep writing!

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If you'd like to contact me, please send me a note through my website <http://www.dorothywiley.com> under the 'Contact' tab.

All the best,

Dorothy

P.S. Don't forget to write a short review, pretty please! You can find this novel and all of my other books on my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/dorothywiley